

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 25, 1956

Go By Steam

On January 6, 1849 there was published in Washington, D.C., Vol. 1, No. 7183, of the "National Intelligencer," a bi-weekly newspaper. The leading story of that important year in California history was a detailed account of the arrival in Rio de Janeiro, on November 2, 1848, of the steamer "California," on her way out to take her place in the line from Panama to Oregon. She had left New York in early October, bound on a round-the-Horn voyage to her home port, Panama, there to start monthly round trips to California.

The Intelligencer story begins with the announcement that the editor has had the opportunity to look over the log of this splendid vessel as far as Rio de Janeiro, where she arrived Nov. 2 on her way out to the West Coast. She had already been followed by the "Oregon." The "Panama," the third and last of the line, "will put out again as soon as the accident to her machinery is repaired," which will probably require a week or ten days. The performance of the 'California' had been admirable. She took Lt. Maury's new route to Rio, and was instructed by her owners not to steam at the rate of more than 200 miles a day."

With an average pressure of only 10 pounds of steam, she made 197 miles a day. She reached Rio in 26 days from New York, having accomplished in that time, and without stopping to coal, upwards to 5,100 sea-miles, or nearly one-fourth of the entire distance around the globe at a single stretch, wrote the log reporter. She might have readily steamed, he continued, 6,000 miles without letting her fires go down, for she had ample coal on board for that purpose when she arrived at Rio.

"This is," according to the writer of the log, "the greatest distance, we believe, ever accomplished at sea under a continuous head of steam. It is more than double the distance from Halifax to Liverpool: and the ease with which it has been accomplished will give some idea of the ingenuity and skill which have been brought to bear, and the success with which they have been applied, in combining models and machinery for that distance and important service."

The distance from Panama to San Francisco is about 3,000 miles, the writer believes, and goes on to declare that this steamer is capable of performing the passage

with great ease and regularity in two weeks. "One may go on foot from Panama to Chagres in a day, and thence, by the connecting line of steamers on this side, to New Orleans in a week," is his prediction.

Before 1848, when the three steamers were put into service on the West Coast, it took six months to travel by sea from New Orleans to California. "Well may it be said, in these go-a-head times, when men have to count time as money: 'Go by steam, and get the lightning to run errands for you: life is too short to go to sea in sailing ships.' "

We learned from the Intelligencer story that Law's line of mail steamers from New York, via Charleston, Havana, and New Orleans, to Chagres, intended to deliver regularly at the last-mentioned places, the mail and passengers. These were to be transported on the backs of mules across the isthmus. On arriving at Panama, they would find two lines of steamers waiting for them. The steamers bound for Central America, Western Mexico, California, and Oregon, or to the Sandwich Islands and China, were to take Aspinwall's line of United States mail steamers - of which the "California" was the first - and steer away north.

Editorially the editor comments : "Hitherto Pacific Coasts of this continent have been removed from its Atlantic borders many months. If we take into consideration the uncertain occurrence of opportunities, and the length of the passage around Cape Horn or across the Rocky Mountains, we should not be surprised at the fact that government, in sending dispatches to its officers and merchants instructions to their agents, along the Pacific Coasts of both Americas, have often to wait 12 months for a reply."

"Thus, these hitherto remote regions, by American enterprise based on American legislation, are about to be lifted up as it were, and placed as near to us as England was until within the last ten years, when steamers first began regularly to cross the ocean.

"What effect this admirable move is to have upon the destinies of California and Oregon - what upon the currency and exchanges of the country by turning the stream of California wealth through our Atlantic ports - though we would gladly know, we must patiently wait to see.

"The increased facilities of communication afforded by these steamers will constitute an epoch in the history of commerce, and perhaps, too, in the history of America,

from which many important consequences and events are to flow."

The California reached Monterey on Feb. 24. bringing the first mail by steamer to the West Coast. New difficulties arose, for when this port was reached the supply of coal was about exhausted. While the passengers roamed the town, crew members went into the woods on the hillsides, where they collected fuel to keep steam in the boilers during the final 100 miles of the journey. This went on for three days, then, after huge stacks of wood had been assembled on the beach and some of it carried on board, a reserve supply of coal was found in bags under a storeroom floor. The journey was resumed to San Francisco where the "California" arrived on Dec 28th.