

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Trail Of Wildflowers

We believe that only a few enthusiastic Naturalists, would like to be taken back in time to the California of 1770, to accompany the Mission fathers in their long journeys from San Diego to Monterey.

The opportunity to see California in the unspoiled beauty of primitive nature would be offset for most of us by the inconvenience of primitive life. Charles Francis Saunders, in his charming book, "Wild Flowers of Old California," published in 1927, takes us in spirit to the California of the earlier period, and introduces us to Padre Juan Crespi, a beloved associate of Padre Junipero Serra, who accompanied the first expedition that blazed El Camino Real, the highway that we now hurry along on our own, and not, like the padres, "on Our Father's business."

The missionary priest noted in his journal many of the bright - hued flowers, which, in the spring, as they do today, lent a fleeting glory to the hills and valleys. The beauty of flowers and birds, the glory of valley and mountain, did not escape his scientific yet reverent eye. Crespi gossips artlessly in his journal of salvia and romero-sags and rosemary, "Herbas olorosas, fragrant herbs, daily trampled by the passing cavalcade, yield up a thousand undistinguished perfumes; fringing streams and afloat on the bosom of still springs." The Spanish called these bubbling fountains *ojas de aguas*, that is, eyes of water; watercress abounds, and is greeted with enthusiasm, for the peppery leaves and stems give a spicy tang to the sadly monotonous diet the travelers had to endure.

Padre Crespi wrote in his journal: "We arrived this day in a very beautiful valley or *canada*, on seeing which it appeared not otherwise than a cultivated or sown valley. We saw a village of Gentiles with little houses of grass, who, on seeing us, all sallied forth on the road, happily and with demonstrations of rejoicing. We descended into this valley and saw that its verdure was of wild gourds, very leafy, and many wild rose bushes."

One day Padre Crespi breaks off a spray upon which he counts six blossoms, full blown, and a round dozen in the bud, and the discovery goes into his journal with as much care as though it were the elusive port of Monterey itself that had been found.

Charles Francis Saunders also wrote of David Douglas, the Scot, and how he introduced the wildflowers of Old California into England. Toward the last of the year 1830, three days before Christmas, there lands at Monterey one David Douglas, a Scotch botanist and collector of plants for the Royal Horticultural Society of London, come on a quest for seeds and specimens of California wildflowers, the fame of whose beauty has begun to be much talked of in Europe.

Although "midwinter as it is, according to the almanacs of men," Douglas finds that in nature's calendar the spring is already well under way. In thickets and arroyos near the little adobe pueblo of Monterey; the crimson splendor of the fuchsia-flowered gooseberry entrances him; no coddled fuchsia of the greenhouse, he thinks, could be more beautiful; lupins and larkspurs, shoulder high, throng him in the damp *canadas*: and in sunny swales the exquisite *nemophila* that we call baby-blue eyes, and which Douglas writes down as the "harbinger of the California spring," spreads rugs of tenderest azure on the ground," just as it did in Padre Crespi's time."

Douglas spent nearly two years in California, principally in the region between San Francisco and Santa Barbara, and to him is credited the introduction into the gardens of European host of delightful California wildflowers cherished there as we Americans in our gardens cherish our exotics. He is also credited with introducing the California poppy to the gardening world.