

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The Way West**

In the decade of the 1840's the United States, almost in a single leap, spanned the territory from the Mississippi to the Pacific. During those ten years Texas, California and the territories of Oregon, Utah, and New Mexico were brought into the Union. Through the influence of a flood of adventurous pioneer settlers and frontiersmen the nation achieved, in this brief time, a transcontinental dominion.

Charles L. Camp wrote in his introduction to Nicholas "Cheyenne" Dawson's "Narrative to California in '41 & '49," "Look to the pioneers then if you would inspect the foundations of the West. In them you will find all shades and conditions of character, the timid and the brave, the modest and the vain, the illiterate and the educated, but common to, nearly all, an outstanding trait - the spirit of adventure in its most active expression."

Fired by this spirit of such men as young John Bidwell, Billy Baldrige and Josiah Belden, inflamed by the stories of the Indian trader, Robidou, and by a letter from John Marsh, the immigration of settlers began across the plains to California in 1841. Nearly 500 signed up for this expedition over an unknown trail. Only 69 eventually found their way to the rendezvous at Sapling Grove, and but few of these had signed the original agreement. Among these recruits was the young schoolteacher, Nicholas Dawson, the author of the little book recently presented to the Monterey History and Art Assn. by the author's grandnephew, George E. Dawson of Carmel.

The "memoirs" was published by the Grabhorn Press of San Francisco in May 1933. The gift copy now in the archives of the association is No. 7 of the Rare Americana Series. The memoirs, written with simplicity and charm, show a modest, contemplative disposition. The author was careful to distribute the original book only to members of his family, having but 50 copies printed and never advertising the work in any way, we are told in the introduction. This may possibly explain the singular fact that no mention of the narrative has ever been made by any writer on Western history or even by book dealers keen to trace down rare "items" of Americana. One copy was found in the Texas State

Library and the University of Texas has a photostat of this. The California State Library also has a copy.

Mr. Camp writes that from internal evidence it appears that the book was printed about the year 1901. Written as it was some 50 years after the scenes described and without the aid of many historical sources it is surprisingly accurate as to main events. The author had read Bidwell's articles in the Century Magazine for 1890 and of course referred to his own manuscript journal kept in California in 1842.

Dawson was apparently the last survivor of the California immigrants of 1841 and his narrative is, appropriately, the last to appear. It is an interesting addition to the record of that event and still more interesting as a sidelight of California life of the period especially the illicit and declining sea-otter trade that earlier bore such fruit in the development of the West.

Camp also tells us that the immigration of 1841 at the start consisted of one of the strangest assortments of souls ever gathered together on the plains. Here three Catholic priests - one of them the famous Father De Smet - and an itinerant, somewhat excitable and eccentric, singing Methodist parson walked, rode and argued day after day.

The various groups were distinguished from each other by messes. In one mess was the future first mayor of San Jose, Joseph Beldon. In the Chiles mess was Charles M. Weber, the founder of Stockton and a prominent and wealthy man in later years in California.

Entering California for the first time across the wild Sierra Nevada was a woman, Nancy A. Kelsey, who walked bare-footed over the crags of Sonora pass carrying her 2-year-old baby girl and leading her horse. This woman, the wife of Benjamin Kelsey, was the truest type of a pioneer mother - following her husband and sometimes leading him, through the most trying hardships because as she said "it's easier to go along than to have to stay home and worry about him."