

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California Overland

"The following narrative was commenced by me on the first of March 1894 - fifty-three years after the occurrence of the principal events narrated - and was written mostly from memory, but with an anxiety to say only the truth, and if any errors have been made, they were unintentional. My object in writing was to gratify my children and leave them the outline of my rather eventful life." These are the opening statements of Nicholas "Cheyenne" Dawson in his "Narrative Overland to California in '41 and '49."

Dawson was born in Glasgow, Beaver County, Penn., January 22, 1819. He left home on the first of May 1838, when he was 13 years old with the purpose of spending six years in seeing the world, with eight or ten dollars in his pocket. He began teaching school in Lexington, Mo., when his funds got down to \$1.

Three years later May (?), 1841, Dawson decided to join a group leaving for California the overland trail. He noted: "It was a very mixed crowd. There were heads of families going out first to find a spot to bring their families to and heads of families taking the families along to share whatever fortune might bring. There were many adventurous youths like myself and John Bidwell (later governor of California), who wanted nothing but to see and experience.

"There were gentlemen seeking health and an English Lord, Lord Romain going out with a half-breed hunter, John Grey to shoot buffalo. Among the last to join the group were some priests, bound for the Flat-head Mission. The modes of transportation were as mixed as the crowd. Some had wagons drawn by oxen other wagons drawn by horses a few had backs and the priests had carts, many were to make the journey on horseback and a few brought nothing but themselves.

"I had traded my horse for an old mule and had bought an interest in Bartleson's wagon and team. When this and my share of the provisions were paid for, I had 75 cents left and I still had that when I arrived in California in November.

Dawson describes San Jose: "San Jose was then a sleepy village of perhaps 150 inhabitants, and with no regular streets. With the exception of one or two the houses were of adobe a few having shingled roofs but mostly

thatched with tule or dirt on timbers. Only three Americans live there. Tom Brown, Capt. Burton and Gulane. They all had Mexican wives. There were farms around, but few gardens, very few stores, and very little in them, no vehicles but carts, made entirely of wood, very little money but plenty of hides and tallow."

Comparing San Jose with Monterey, our historian of 1841 writes: "The streets meandered and were wider in some places than in others. The houses fronted in all directions. There were no sidewalks, but the houses frequently had covered but unfloored balconies in front. Inside there was no floor, very seldom any chairs or tables, no glass windows and no chimneys. Later I found that Los Angeles, San Diego, and Monterey were but little better towns."

After writing of many experiences and jobs in California, Dawson received a "letter by hand", from Job F. Dye in Monterey requesting him to come here and keep store for him.

"I found Monterey but little better than San Jose, and Mr. Dye a plain honorable Kentuckian similar to the Missourians whom I had learned to admire. I soon struck a trade with him at \$20 per month, cash. When the bargain was closed, Mr. Dye told me to select any ready-made clothing in stock that I needed and charge it to myself, and when I went to supper and had bread tea and vegetables, and best of all a neat lively lady at the head of the table I felt like a new man."

"Found T. H. Green in Monterey clerking for T.O. Larkin. Soon after my arrival he set up a store of his own out at a ranch near the redwoods."

Later Dawson went to Santa Cruz to take charge at Dye's store there and where he remained for one year. Still later, Dye decided to try otter or seal hunting and invited Dawson to join him. Their outfit consisted of three boats similar to whale boats and were made by Dye himself. They were clinker built some 15 feet long and carried three men each; the hunter on the front seat, with three rifles and a paddle: a hand in midship with a paddle; and steerman behind, with a paddle and a mast and sail to use when desired. We took provisions and ammunition in the boats."