

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Coastal Sea Otter Hunting

In his narrative "Overland to California in 1841" by Nicholas "Cheyenne" Dawson, the author describes sea otter hunting off the coast of California. Since the discovery of otter down the coast several years ago there has been much interest in their history, mode of living, the old-time industry, their catch and value of the hides.

Dawson reports that he with Job Dye and a man by the name of Simmons coasted down from Monterey to Santa Barbara, and out to and around Santa Rosa and San Miguel Islands killing a few otters. There they found the otter lying on the kelp with only the head in sight in bunches or schools.

"They are shot in the head and can best be hunted when the water is still. Approaching noiselessly and placing our boats so that the otter were in the center we would begin the battle, loading and firing rapidly into the water until the otter were all scattered. Then picking up our game, we would give chase to one of the runaways. Here the difficulty was in keeping track of the game, as they travel under water and only come to the surface for breath. The chase is kept up until the otter is killed or the trail lost; then if no other otter can be started the hunt is up and as soon as skinning, fleecing, and drying is through with, a travel is made to another locality. Risks will be run by a hunter for an otter skin, worth \$30, and especially when there is rivalry among the hunters." write Mr. Dawson.

After forming a partnership with A. B. Thompson, and two Santa Barbara hunters. Sparks and Nidever, joining the hunters and making five boats. San Nicolas Island was first visited. Here they searched on shore for the lone woman whom they knew to be on the island, but failed to find her, although they found her tracks. Why she was there Dawson gave this explanation.

"Such of the Santa Barbara Islands as had fresh water on them had once been inhabited by a low type of Indians who eked out a miserable existence by fishing for and eating shellfish. Some were induced to emigrate and join the missions, but a remnant remained and these being about to perish from starvation, an effort

was made headed by the priests to have them all transported to the mainland.

"A vessel was sent and at San Nicholas after all were on board, this woman jumped overboard and swam ashore. A southeast storm coming on, the captain made sail without further search. (Since that time, I have seen an account of her rescue by George Nadever and Charley Brown, both of whom I knew. They found her while they were on an otter hunt, and carried her to the mainland, where she soon died)."

A fascinating story was printed in Scribner's Monthly in the year 1880, entitled "Eighteen Years Alone - A Tale of the Pacific." It is the unfolding of the life of a woman alone on the Santa Barbara Islands and of her rescue in 1853. The author of the tale is not given but its authenticity is declared several times as the story proceeds. The "Narrative Overland to California, 1841" also mentions this woman and further proves that the woman actually lived there and was rescued only to die in Santa Barbara a short time later.

On this deserted island a human being actually lived alone. The vessel which deserted her was owned by a rich Spaniard from Monterey and was commanded by Capt. Charles Hubbard. (The name of the Spaniard was not given.) The schooner bore the name "Peon les Nada" and she started out from Santa Barbara harbor on an April morning. After a cruise of otter hunting the vessel proceeded to San Nicholas Island to bring the Indian Islanders to the mainland in accordance with the will of the church fathers. A storm arose as the 20 islanders were hurried aboard and all speed was made to reach the schooner.

In the excitement and confusion of the final abandonment of their home it was not noticed that a child had been left behind. The mother supposed that it had been carried aboard in the arms of an old sailor. She frantically implored the man to return. The captain promised to return after the storm had subsided. The young mother desperate and despite all efforts to detain her jumped overboard and struck out through the kelpy waters for the shore. No attempt made to rescue her and in a moment she was lost in the seething waves.

It was intention of Capt. Hubbard to return to the island and rescue the mother and child as soon as possible but the vessel was ordered to go to Santa Barbara to take George Nidever and a party of sea otter hunters to

Santa Rosa Island, afterward to carry from Monterey a cargo of timber to San Francisco. On that trip the Peonles Nada capsized at the entrance to the Golden Gate.

In July 1883 Capt. Nidever returned to the island and there they found the woman still alive but no child. He took her to his home in Santa Barbara and put her in charge of his Spanish wife. But civilization did not agree with her and she now lies buried in the walled cemetery at the mission.