

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'California First'

Dr. Rockwell D. Hunt, eminent California author and historian, president emeritus of the Conference of California Historical Societies, now 90 years of age, has written a very worthwhile book "California Firsts", just published by the Fearon Publishers of San Francisco.

In a preview of "California Firsts" we have discovered a few paragraphs telling the story of the first ship built in California, according to Dr. Hunt. He writes that although the Indians had been making crude boats (or canoes) and rafts from time immemorial, we cannot call their primitive water-craft ships. The first real ships to appear in our California waters - not very imposing in the light of today, it must be admitted - were those captained by the Spanish, "Conquistadores", beginning with Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, in 1542.

Among the first Americans to settle in California was Joseph Chapman, reputedly a native of New England, about whose early life little is known. He was one of the men attached to Hippolyte de Bouchard, called by some a patriot, by others a pirate. In one of the many forays of the Bouchard party at Monterey, Chapman separated himself from it and went on his own. This was in 1818, when political conditions in Alta California were anything but stable.

Chapman, who was then about 30 years of age, ingratiated himself with the Spanish leaders, and after a brief period of imprisonment decided to remain in the country. In a little while he had become the most famous foreign resident of that period, according to the opinion expressed by Dr. Hunt. In fact, he became a general favorite; and it was not long until he married one of the daughters of the Ortega family, which stood high in the Spanish aristocracy. The Chapmans had a family of five children.

Dr. Hunt's story continues with the fact that Chapman became a "typical handyman" and has been called a "jack of all trades." He did odd jobs at the missions, planted a vineyard at Los Angeles, built several grist mills, even served as a surgeon on occasion. Most important of all, he built a ship, or schooner, the first, it is claimed, to be built in California. This was soon after he parted company with Bouchard in 1818. The 60-ton vessel, framed at San Gabriel mission, was transported

with some difficulty to San Pedro, where Chapman launched it successfully. This unusual event is but one of several reasons for preserving the name and memory of Joseph Chapman in the story of a rather confused period in California history, Dr. Hunt believes.

It is well known that the history of pre-American California also includes the peninsula to the south, Baja California. Accordingly mention may be made of the building of another ship at an earlier date, many years in fact, before the first actual occupation of Alta California by the Spaniards.

Dr. Hunt relates that in establishing the early missions in Baja California the Jesuit leaders were in great need of a seaworthy ship to transport supplies from the mainland and to explore the gulf. Father Juan Ugarte, successor to Salvaterra as head of the enterprise, felt the need keenly; but in that land "there were neither planks, sails, rigging, tar, or other necessities for such work, no builder, shipwright, sawyer, or other naval artificers."

Father Ugarte was indefatigable, and boldly determined to build a ship himself. Having learned of straight trees more than a hundred miles northwest of Loreto. With the aid of Indians and incredible toil, he felled trees and shaped them into planks, Dr. Hunt learned during his research, in four months' time the planks were piled on the beach; and under the watchful eye of the heroic leader, amazing as it seems, a sturdy ship gradually took shape.

In September 1719, Father Ugarte nailed a crude cross to the bowsprit and actually launched his ship on the waters of the Gulf of California. Most appropriately he christened her "El Triunfo de la Cruz"* (The Triumph of the Cross).

She was the first ship built in California and was said to be superior to any vessel previously seen on the coast. She rendered good service long after the death of her builder, as an illustration of the versatility of those early missionaries. Theodore Hittell, another California historian of note, declared "like the Santa Maria and the Mayflower, she ought to be remembered and glorified in the histories of civilization yet to be written."