

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **'Fantastic Freebooter'**

We have just received a copy of the Milwaukee Journal, issue of March 31 of this year, in which there is a fascinating story of the "Fantastic Freebooter of the Banana Lands," meaning William Walker, Tennessee soldier of fortune, who came to California in 1853 to seek fame and fortune. Wanting to learn more about this adventurous gentleman, we turned to research of several books of California and San Francisco history, with interesting results.

California Through Four Centuries by the late Phil Townsend Hanna has this to say about William Walker: "Nov. 22, 1853 - William Walker, 'gray-eyed man of destiny,' with 48 filibuster followers, recruited in San Francisco, whence he had sailed Oct. 16, 1853, captured La Paz, in Lower California, and proclaimed the Republic of Lower California. He was soon repulsed and driven from the peninsula. Later in 1855-1860, he led other filibuster campaigns in Nicaragua and Honduras. These ultimately failed and Walker was executed in Honduras in 1860."

The Milwaukee Journal reports that filibustering these days is practiced chiefly in the United States Senate as a verbal exercise to prevent congressional action. But back in the 1850's filibusters were men of action, ruthless American adventurers who went after glory and fortune in Latin America.

William Walker, as baffling an America as ever crossed history's pages, was the principal filibuster. Walker flourished in the years before the Civil War, when many Americans thought it was their country's destiny to expand from pole to pole.

Walker was born in Nashville, Tenn., in 1824. He was a puny lad, a "mama's boy" who loved books but not schools, according to the reporter of the Journal. Nevertheless, he was graduated from the University of Nashville when he was 14. He went to medical school and received his M.D. at 19. He then studied medicine in Paris for a year and toured Europe for another year.

But the little man found medicine unexciting. He turned to law and was admitted to the bar in New Orleans. When his shingle attracted few clients, according to an old Harper's Weekly, "he fell back on the profession

which absorbs all the restless intellects of the country - the press."

He became editor of the New Orleans Daily Crescent, which did not prosper either, so Walker came to California in 1850 and practiced law and journalism here. He was involved in several duels within three years and once served a jail term for contempt of court. It was then that he became restless again and dreamed of colonizing Lower California, then, as now a part of Mexico.

When he failed to get Mexican sanction, he used the pretext that certain Mexicans had asked him to protect them from Apache Indians. He sailed from San Francisco as Hanna has told us in "California Through Four Centuries," with 45 men, landed at La Paz, proclaimed Lower California a republic and himself its president. He later annexed the state of Sonora.

But the Mexicans who supposedly had asked his protection soon started harassing him. He was forced to flee north where he was arrested for violating United States neutrality law. Brought to trial in San Francisco, he was acquitted by a sympathetic jury. Fines imposed on his followers were never paid.

After many other adventures and trouble south of the border, William Walker surrendered on May 1, 1857, to the United States Navy, which had intervened. But Walker was not through. He still claimed to be president of Nicaragua. He recruited another force and sailed out of Mobile, Ala., under the noses of port authorities. At the mouth of the San Juan River, near his destination, he defied the orders of an American naval vessel and landed. He was arrested but was freed by President Buchanan on the grounds that the arrest took place on foreign soil.

Returning to the United States Walker settled in New Orleans where he wrote "The War in Nicaragua," which has been called an accurate and impersonal history of the events there.

He tried a third time to conquer and set up his empire and landed in Honduras. He was arrested by Capt. Norvall Salmon of the British navy and turned over to Honduras authorities.

The Hondurans took no chances that Walker might attempt to take over their country. He was tried for invasion and was shot by a firing squad at Trujillo on Sept. 12, 1860. Today a slab marks the spot where the

fantastic, little adventurer met his end. It bears only his name and date of death, according to Donald H. Dooley, who wrote the feature article for the Journal.