

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Gold Rush Steamers

The Book Club of California has just issued four of the series of Keepsakes, Gold Rush Streamers, to members of the club. The series is edited by John Haskell Kemble and designed and printed by the Grabhorn Press of San Francisco.

No. 1 in the series is "California," the steamer which brought the first mail to California in 1849. John Haskell Kemble of Pomona College tells the story of the construction and history of this steamer in the folder which is illustrated with a lithograph by Sarony & Major of New York City, probably issued in 1848. It is reproduced from the only known copy in existence which is in the Francis B. C. Bradlee collection at the Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.

The California was built of oak and cedar, copper and iron fastened, at a cost of \$200,082.

When in 1847, the New York shipping firm of Howland & Aspinwell obtained a subsidy from the Navy Department to carry the mail by steamers from Panama to California and Oregon on a monthly basis or schedule, they at once set about providing the vessels required. The three ships they ordered were named "California, Oregon, and Panama," and to operate them the Pacific Steamship Co. was organized. The California was built by William H. Webb, the greatest New York shipbuilder of the day, laying her keel on Jan. 4, 1848, and launching her on May 19.

The new ship sailed from New York for the Pacific coast on Oct. 7, 1848. This was before the news of gold discovery at Coloma was known in New York, so she carried only a few passengers for way ports. While en route around South America, news of California gold was told, so when she put into Panama, there were literally thousands of Argonauts eagerly awaiting passage about aboard her. Accommodations for 60 passengers was soon stretched to accommodate 365. The voyage up the coast was enlivened by food shortages, a strike of the stokers, and the exhaustion of the coal supply so that some of the ship's wooden fittings had to be burned in order to get to Monterey. There passengers and crew chopped wood for five days, and the California finally headed in through the Golden Gate on Feb. 28, 1849. Her coming had been

anticipated in San Francisco, and the Alta California reported that "her fine appearance as she came in sight of the town called forth cheer upon cheer from enraptured citizens, who were assembled in masses upon the heights commanding, a view of the Bay. . ."

After she had anchored and landed her passengers, the California was deserted by all her crew except Capt. Cleveland Forbes and the 3rd assistant engineer. The ship lay helplessly at anchor until mid-April, when Capt. Forbes succeeded in assembling a crew. She made a gala excursion around the bay on April 21 with a party of guests aboard and sailed for Panama on May 1.

After a varied career as a coastwise vessel, sailing occasionally to Panama or the Pacific Northwest and being sold to Holiday & Brenham's California, Oregon, & Mexico Steamship Co., the California was repurchased by Pacific Mail in 1872 and on Feb 28, 1874 she made an excursion around San Francisco Bay, decked with flags and garlands and with many people onboard who had arrived on her a quarter of a century before. Later that year, Goodall, Nelson & Perking purchased her from Pacific Mail, and at the end of 1875, her engines removed, she was sold to N. Bichard. Riggered as a bark, she was engaged in the coal and lumber trade on the Pacific until she was wrecked near Pacasmayo, Peru, in the winter of 1894-1895 with a cargo of lumber aboard from Port Dadlock, Wash.