

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Samoa 62 Years Ago

In our last Diary we quoted from an Interview with Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson published Friday, Oct. 22, 1897 in San Francisco, the day after her arrival on board the "Australia." Today we will continue to give her report of the activities in Honolulu and the South Pacific as relating to the United States 62 years ago.

Stopping at the Occidental Hotel in San Francisco Mrs. Stevenson was interviewed there by J. F. Rose-Soley for The Call. She explained to the reporter that her visit to California was mainly for business reasons. "I have to go to London," she said, "to arrange for the publication of my late husband's life. Sydney Colvin has the work in hand; he has all the material, and some time ago he wrote asking my presence in London. The book is to be partly in the nature of a biography and partly a collection of letters, and it will take some time before the task can be completed. In the meantime, I am going to avoid the English climate by spending the winter here, and next spring I shall go to London and commence work with Mr. Colvin."

Mrs. Stevenson was not lonely during the winter months she spent in California, for, according to her own statement, she had hosts of friends and relatives here, and already when she had landed but a few hours before this interview in 1897, there was quite a family party gathered together at the hotel. Mrs. Strong, who accompanied her mother from Samoa, was present, and Lloyd Osborn, with his charming, young California bride, had come over from Berkeley to greet his mother and sister. Mrs. Stevenson's sister, Mrs. Nellie van de Grift Sanchez, and her young son, and last but not least according to the story, there was the pride of the Stevenson family, a grandchild born at Vailima, a kicking lusty youngster of eight months.

Rose-Soley wrote that Mrs. Stevenson had little or no news to report from Samoa. Things do not happen very often down there, she said, or if they did happen, they took a long time about it. The only thing of importance she had to say was the supporters of Mataafa were making all of the ex-king's followers come in and make submission to the de Facto Monarch Malietoa, so that there was then only one rebel king in the field, the stubborn Tamasese, who still, safely entrenched at

Leulomoenga, declined to yield to the puppet monarch of the three powers.

All this was the normal state of affairs in Samoa so there is no use worrying about it, stated Mrs. Stevenson. "The only question is whether, if Mataafa is brought back, his followers will maintain their present attitude of peaceful submission. Probably not. The chances are that, if this element of strife is let loose there will be another tribal war, and the treaty powers will have again to crush the futile conflict."-

In the opinion of her interviewer Mrs. Stevenson, coming straight from the Navigators, where, whatever one may say about the system of government, native life is absolutely free and unhampered, she naturally sympathized greatly with the oppressed Hawaiians, and was strongly opposed to the attempt then being made to force them into annexation with the United States.

"No, I did not see any of the leading Hawaiian chiefs in Honolulu, my stay there was too short." Mrs. Stevenson replied to the reporters questioning. "But I may tell you this, in my opinion the annexation of Hawaii is a foolish and unjust thing for the United States to attempt. Unjust because the natives are all opposed to it, and foolish because the Union will only find itself with a big white elephant on its hands, the possession of which will involve it in responsibilities, the extent of which we cannot measure at present."

Thus spoke the lady who at that time probably knew better than any other the native of the South Seas, who had been for many years of her life a sister to the brown women, and for whom when the Alameda steamed out of Apia Bay 62 years ago, hundreds of weeping natives thronged the beach. Men, women and children crowded in their canoes to the side of the steamer to bid farewell, and even the white passengers on board could not forbear crying for sympathy.

"I said farewell," is all Mrs. Stevenson answered when asked the question as to whether she would ever return to Samoa.

Fanny Osborn Stevenson did return to Vailima but it was after death. She had sold Vailima to a Russian merchant named Kunst, whose heirs later sold it to the German government, and it became the home of the German governor of Samoa. Later it became the British government house with the Union Jack floating over it.

In 1898 she went to England, underwent a major operation, returned to California, and purchased a house in San Francisco. In 1908 she lived in Santa Barbara where she died Feb. 18, 1914. In the spring of 1915, her daughter, Isabel Field, sailed for Samoa with Mrs. Stevenson's ashes, in answer to her mother's request. On June 22 they were finally interred beside the body of her husband, Robert Louis Stevenson.

The following inscription was placed in bronze on Fanny's tomb:

"Teacher, tender comrade, wife.
A fellow-farer true through life,
Heart whole and soul free,
The August Father gave to me."