

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A German Traveler's View Of Monterey In 1849

We have just made the acquaintance of a new-old book, "Bound for Sacramento," – travel-pictures of a returned wanderer, translated from the German by Ruth Frey Axe. The book was printed as a limited edition of 450 copies, by the Saunders Studio Press of Claremont, Calif., and is a reprint of an original volume written by Carl Meyer in 1855.

The introduction tells the reader that Meyer was probably a German Swiss and was evidently highly educated; but why he came to California he does not state. He reached Monterey on the "Sarah Elisa" sometime in the early part of July of 1849 and after a few days here proceeded to Alisal where he was the guest of W.E. P. Hartnell.

The author begins his chapter on Monterey by calling the town "California Paradise" and writing that it had the following inscription on its portal: "Quien quierre morir, que se vaya del puebla (pueblo)" which translated means, "He who wishes to die should go from this town."

The climate of Monterey, he reported, is so healthy, that there is only one death to six births and only one doctor is needed for 3,000 souls. "Actually at the time of my arrival there was only one doctor who assured me that during the whole summer only one important case of illness occurred among the natives."

He described his walk between the scattered vine-covered buildings on his way to find food. Everything was ready in the California hotel. The aroma of the meal wafted toward him and his companion of the ship, Dr. Whitefield, and a group of Mexican troubadours were waiting to entertain them. He reports that the landlady, Senora Petronella, was willing to put kitchen and cellar with all appurtenances at the disposition of her newly arrived guests.

"We found cordiality on all sides and observed that although the European was still a stranger in Monterey he was much liked there. Otherwise we surely could not have been favored, right on the first day, with an invitation from the former alcalde of the city, Mr. Hartnell, who placed his house at our disposal so that we could enjoy resting in it as long as we liked, and who would have been insulted by a refusal of this invitation.

"After we had obtained an ineffaceable picture of the old California coast city we proceeded to his rancho, Patrocinio del Alisal, situated about 20 miles from Monterey."

His description of Monterey's waterfront, was: "Monterey, seen from the calm harbor, resembled a bird niche around which circled flocks of pelicans, sea-ducks and sea-gulls who undisturbedly pursue their wild hunt in the bay for fish. Bounded on the south by a pine-covered slope, on the north by a flat garden-covered plain; and on the west by cool forests, the town gives ample evidence of the priests' sagacity in the choice of their dwelling places. Besides several churches and the garrison, the city has few prominent buildings."

To the visiting German, Monterey appeared as a pleasure-loving place. He thought the inhabitants alternated between piety and amusement. Those who were wealthy, he wrote, were happy and reached a very old age, spending their time visiting fairs and fandangos. The words "Mucho divertissemento" (much pleasure) were uttered by all their well-wishers as they rode from the city with Hartnell to his California estate in the carriage to which "four lively ponies were spanned."

When they reached ranch buildings at Alisal, group of his family appeared. Without further ado they embraced the visitor one by one in the manner of the land, he wrote, welcomed him daily and called him their desired guest and placed the house at his disposal. This was a Mexican custom which was not merely empty words or etiquette but showed expressively the liberality which was not to be found in any other land.

"The European speaks for himself as 'your most humble servant.' The Californian calls himself your 'friend' and really upholds this relationship"—so Carl Meyer, the author, compliments his new-found friends.