

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Sea Captain's View Of Monterey

From time to time it has been interesting to read articles composed by early navigators and historians expressing their impression of Monterey in the very early days. Today I came across a narrative written by one M. Benard and entitled "Memoires Du-Capitaine Peron, Dur Ses Voyages Aux Cotes Nord-Oust De l'Amerique."

In the latter part of October or November of 1796, the Otter, with Capt. Ebenezer Dorr, sailed into the Port of Monterey, the first American vessel, so far as is known, to touch at a California port. The Otter was a north west trader and had run out of provisions; Dorr concluded to stop at Monterey to secure supplies, if possible, before proceeding to China.

The full account of her trading operations on the Northwest coast and her visit to Monterey is to be found in this little-known work, published in Paris in 1824 in two thin volumes.

H. R. Wager made a translation of the impressions of the captain while in Monterey and it was printed in an early issue of the California Historical Society quarterly.

"Monterey is the residence of the governor general whose jurisdiction is extended over all the Californians from the 23rd to the 38th degree of north latitude. From accounts which I managed to obtain around the country, the population can be estimated at about four or five individuals per square league, and which promises to increase very rapidly. The beauty of the climate and fertility of the soil are the causes which favor the growth of the country. Civilization has not made great progress. . .

"The last fort, which the Spaniards call Presidio, is constructed on the Point of Pines and dominates entirely the anchorage. The landing must be made on low and swampy ground, which causes a great deal of embarrassment, especially at low tide."

"The object of our touching the port was to secure food and other supplies. Our first step, therefore, was to go to the governor. At the landing we were received by an officer of the post and the secretary of the governor."

It took the men an hour to walk to what probably was the Presidio. It was 2 o'clock and our audience with the

governor was at 3:30, so to occupy the time of waiting they were offered an excellent cup of chocolate. This delicate attention was very well received by them, for men accustomed to salt fish and biscuit it was a great treat.

Before reaching the governor's apartment, the men had to cross a big square enclosed in walls 12 feet high. The apartment of the governor, Capt. Dorr reports, and the rest of the buildings devoted to the garrison, were situated at the back of the place against the western wall and facing the east.

"These different buildings are of the slightest character, have only one floor," he wrote, "and can only be sufficient to house a hundred people, a number entirely out of proportion for the guard and police of the district as large as that of Monterey."

"To complete our cargo of flour we lacked about 380 pounds. The governor, in order to hurry these provisions, gave the order in my presence to augment the number of millers. I showed my surprise and could not understand how so many people were necessary for so simple an operation.

"In Europe.," said I, "the smallest mill would produce a hundred pounds an hour." He answered: "Follow me."

In the workroom where he took the captain, 15 to 20 Indians were seated on their heels, having in front of them a flat stone two and a half feet in length and a half foot in width. They had in their hands another stone of prismatic shape with which they were grinding the grain. This was the method used by the savages and some of the Negroes in the colonies, but for the capital of the government, as extended as that of California, he could not understand why a mill was not established like the ones in Europe.

"The governor told me that M. de Perouse had shown the same surprise as I had. and that he had the kindness to leave a model for a mill of the form as simple as it was economical, but that in spite of his encouragement and his orders, no worker up to that time had been found willing to put his hand to the work.

"The aspect of the town shows ignorance in the arts and a stationary, state of the country. The houses and cabins are constructed without taste, the furniture coarse, the utensils imperfect - and absolute lack of conveniences of life - such was the picture that everything showed industry is in general the feeble side

of Spanish establishments and it is for this that they cost so dear to their government.”

Bancroft discovered in the archives copies of two letters from Diego de Borica, the governor, in which an account was given of the stay of the Otter. There also is some correspondence about a draft on Boston for 41 pounds, 12 shillings which Dorr gave to Gov. Borcia in payment for food. There is no direct evidence that the draft was paid except that the equivalent in Mexican pesos was finally credited back to Monterey.