

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

March 6, 1963

Spanish Consternation At Alien Ship

When the commander of the ship which came into Monterey Harbor in 1817 - the first foreign vessel at Monterey under the governorship of Don Vicente Pablo de Sola - answered that it was an American vessel, there was consternation on shore.

If there were only a boat at hand, thought the commandant. If Spain, in the days of her grandeur, had only supplied the metropolitan seaport of Alta California with a ship wherewith to board ships, he would show the World what a brave man will do in the service of his country; But alas! There was none.

Meanwhile the governor, who had tarried to mend some rips in his full dress uniform, appeared upon the scene, according to Bancroft in his "California Pastoral", he was attended by his officers, all with shoes blacked and hair oiled.

All on shore felt the dreaded moment approaching, as a boat was seen being lowered from the vessel and making toward them. Fearlessly it approached the land, and as the bow touched the beach a man stepped forth and nodded to the august assemblage. Instantly he was surrounded by soldiers, the measure taken of his man-killing capabilities. He was arrayed all in the black, according to Bancroft's description of the visitor, with high hat and swallowtail coat - a private disguised as a priest it was whispered. Fortunately for the peace of California, the creature carried no weapon. He was fully in their power. If, as they supposed, he was the captain of the vessel, they had him in their power.

Leaving the Army to guard the ship, lest some daring sailor rush to the rescue of his captain, the Yankee skipper was conducted to the presence of the governor. Signifying that he spoke only English, an interpreter was procured in the person of a seaman from the ship.

The prisoner, questioned bluntly, declared he was not a spy, and was not an enemy.

"Then tell me, sir" the governor demanded, "who are you, whence and why you came, whither bound, and what flag you sail under."

"I am an American," the captain replied, "I sail under the United States Flag; I am last from the Russian possessions, and am bound for the Hawaiian Islands; I

have stopped to offer for sale some Chinese goods of which I have a supply on board.

The governor thereupon retired to his house, Bancroft reports, to hold council with his officers, while the prisoners were conducted to the plaza, and placed in the center, still closely guarded.

"He is a cannibal," remarked one of the watchers, "for he chews tobacco, which is more filthy than eating human flesh."

In any event they all agreed that he was a heathen, as they could see in every feature that he had never been baptized; and this opinion was presently more fully confirmed in their minds when the noon bell sounded for Ave Maria and the prisoner neither kneeled nor removed his hat like the others.

"Down! Down on your knees, barbarian!" the guards exclaimed as best they were able to make themselves understood. The skipper turned pale as he thought his hour had come and that he was to be shot.

"You wouldn't murder a man like wild Indians, would you?" But when he understood that they only wished him to pray a little, he put on an appearance of piety with thankful heart."

With the dust marks still upon his knees and on the tails of his diplomatic coat, the captain was finally ushered into the august presence of the governor.

"We cannot find you guilty of being a pirate or a spy, for lack of evidence, though doubtless you are both. A storm might have blown you hither and wanting water you may have said you had Chinese goods for sale. Neither can we prove your flag piratical, though it looks so, as indeed you do. You may have water; but you must be off within five hours or be hanged."

Bancroft ends the article by saying that we may be sure that the captain did not unnecessarily delay his departure. Five months afterward an English man-of-war in like manner disturbed the serenity of the sleepy capital. From the boat sent ashore, in polite terms and good Spanish, the officials were informed that the ship was on a voyage of observation round the world, and had called that the officers might pay their respects to the governor of California. As there were no powder and shot here, and as the high responding parties were smoother, the reply was as courteous as had been the announcement.