

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Mystery Anchor

On April 29, 1946, this announcement appeared in The Herald:

“Assembled in the sunny plaza of the Old Custom House, where they were sheltered from the chill north wind, more than one hundred members of the Monterey History and Art Assn. and other interested citizens took part in Sunday’s unveiling of Monterey’s newest landmark.”

Although new among local landmarks, the bronze anchor at the northerly end of the Custom House is believed to be most ancient; its origin is shrouded in mystery, as the late Col. Roger S. Fitch, then president of the association, pointed out.

Some have advanced the theory that it may have been lost by the ill-fated Natalia, on which Napoleon is said to have escaped from Elba, but there is no serious pretense that it has any great historic significance in itself.

The anchor is, however, a rare and beautiful specimen of ancient craftsmanship, hand-forged from bronze, a metal not used in fabrication of anchors for a century or more. Its proportions are graceful and massive and it is amazingly well preserved after many decades of immersion.

It was discovered in 1944 when it accidentally fouled the anchor of a visiting oil tanker and was drawn to the surface. To insure that the anchor would remain here, W.M. O'Donnell, then publisher of The Herald, advanced the small sum asked by the tanker’s captain.

Some folks thought it should be placed on the lawn in Friendly Plaza instead of by Monterey Bay whence it came. But those of the latter group finally won, after much publicity and argument.

Because it was found here and in the very nature of things, is intimately associated with nautical phases of local history, the anchor should be a waterfront feature. Since the Custom House was official headquarters for shipping activity in the days of wooden ships and iron men, that site finally was chosen.

As trustee for the city the Monterey History and Art Assn. continues to protect the city’s interest in the

anchor, just as in the care of scores of items exhibited in the museum for which the building is used.

It is to this day, after 20 years, the object of interest and admiration for thousands of tourists as well as photographers and Peninsula residents who pass daily.

During unveiling ceremonies April 28, 1946, Mr. O'Donnell, chairman of the association’s anchor committee, gave credit to Capt. A.P. Kurtz of a Tidewater Associated tanker for finding the anchor near the terminus of the submarine pipeline a mile off Seaside beach.

Through the late Allen Knight of Carmel and Monterey, Andrew Skov of Monterey and the crew of the purse seiner “Liberator,” under direction of Sal and Vince Colletto, the anchor was landed on shore to rest on property owned and administered by the California Division of Beaches and Parks.

Chief Boatswain’s Mate Herman Korf of the Coast Guard discussed the possible background of the old anchor, then the meeting was moved to the unveiling site. A ribbon with which the anchor had been festooned was removed while Manuel Campos and his musicians played “Anchors Aweigh.” I still have a bit of that gold ribbon.

Special guests and speakers included Street Supt. Manuel Perry, the crew that moved the heavy anchor, Thomas Harper of Tidewater Associated, and Laura Bride Powers, former Custom House curator.

Other anchor committee members were Armin Hansen, Myron Oliver and Mrs. Mary L. Greene. The stanchion against which the anchor rests was fashioned by R.A. Wilson, then chief ranger at Point Lobos, with wrought ironwork by Francis Whitaker of Carmel.