

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 5, 1964

Sea Otter Hunting

Jack Swan, pioneer builder of California's First Theatre in Monterey, was one of the first writers to deal with the subject of the sea otter trade up and down California's coast. His first article appeared October 8, 1875.

I have before me also a paper-bound book, "Monterey Sanctuary," by Margaret Beresford Forbes, written in 1940, in which she has seven pages devoted to the sea otter's life and habits. The book was presented by the author to the late Miss Ann Hadden, who in turn presented it to the Monterey History and Art Association, a few months before her death.

Swan began his story: "Under the Spanish rule otter hunting was prohibited on the coast of California. Thomas Doak, who left a Boston vessel engaged in the fur trade on the northwest coast of America, told me in 1845 that sea otters could be seen not far from where the Old Custom House is now, and that no one was allowed to shoot them. Afterwards, under Mexican rule, people had to take out a license. Some hunters did very well at the business."

On November 13, 1962, a plaque honoring Thomas Doak, George Mayo and Marcus Grover was unveiled at Carmel Mission by the California State Society. They had come to California from Massachusetts on sailing vessels in the early 1800's and remained as settlers. Two were baptized at Carmel Mission and one at the Royal Presidio Chapel in Monterey. These three men, according to Monsignor James Cullton's "Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey," were Monterey's first Americans.

We also know that Thomas Doak was in Monterey in 1841, for he worked on the Old Custom House during that time, under Mexican rule, when the building was being constructed or changed by Thomas Oliver Larkin. Doak's name was listed among the carpenters in Larkin's account book now in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley.

Swan goes on to relate that Capt. J.B.R. Cooper brought down a lot of Kodiak Indians with their cayucas or skin canoes from the northwest coast. They were very skillful in spearing the otter and slaughtered a large number. Andrew Waton, another pioneer of this region,

accompanied Captain Cooper on one of his sea otter hunting expeditions on the coast.

Swan wrote that in 1875 the otter was very scarce on the coast, that in the early days it provided a profitable business that a skilled and lucky person could enter into without fear of loss.

Among the most successful otter hunters of the early days was one called Black Steward. One morning, Swan related, Steward walked through the pine forest to the beach between Point Pinos and Cypress Point and returned in the afternoon with the pelts of seven otters which he had shot and skinned, a rich day's work considering the high price paid for pelts.