

A Strange Sail

We may be sure that the arrival of the first foreign ship at Monterey in 1812 was an event.

Where the Custom House Reservation is now was probably the setting for the gathering of citizens, the commandante of the military post, Don Jose Maria Estudillo, and the governor, Don Vicente Pablo de Sola.

It arrived on a soft spring morning as a gentle breeze blew from the northwest. The lookout stationed at Punta de Pinos came rushing is on horseback through the Presidio gate and made straight for the commandante's house.

Hubert Howe Bancroft in his "California Pastoral" makes an exciting story of the event. "What is the matter?" Bancroft quotes Don Jose as asking the lookout as he came to the door.

"A sail! A strange sail far out at sea; it is very far out, but it seems to have the intention of coming here," replied the lookout.

"Ho there! My glass and trumpet," the commander shouted, "and bring my coat, the best one with the gold braid, and don't forget my boots and hat. Where is my sword? And hunt me up that chart of the flags of the nations."

"Now sound the drum!" he cried, according to Bancroft, "and let the infantry and artillery appear; let all who love their country join with me in her defense, prepared to shed our last drop of blood for God and the king!"

The drummers rushed forth, beating for dear life round the plaza (where the Standard Oil Station is now) while the troops mounted their horses and the artillerymen and militia repaired to the fort.

The women made everything ready for flight, and the old men and boys got out their swords and flintlocks and scoured from them the rust. At the fort, according to history, the men heated some balls red hot, so as to do the fullest damage to the ship.

We suppose they wondered "Is it a pirate? Or a Frenchman or a Yankee?" It did not matter; it was all one; it should see, whatever it was, that the country was not to be easily wrested from its noble and brave defenders.

Slowly and surely as an impending fate, the vessel approached the harbor, until distinctness marked its every outline and the ever broadening sails were loosened and allowed to flap in the wind.

The commander planted himself at the foot of the fort, probably near where the Custom House was built about 10 years later. He clutched his big trumpet nervously, writes Bancroft, and gazed at frequent intervals through his glass and studied attentively his flag pictures.

By and by, after faithful study, applying to the matter to the fullest extent the exercise of his intellect, the commander pronounced the strange sail a schooner of 30 to 100 tons burden; but of what nation it was impossible to determine.

The streaked and starred bunting flying at the masthead was not on his chart of flags of all nations, which was fully 50 years old. It was evidently a private signal, and there was not a reasonable doubt of its being that of a corsair, the red streaks signifying rivers of blood and the stars the number of cities taken, writes Bancroft.

The commander thought he could discern war-like preparations on board; nevertheless, he would play on her at once by his old successful tactics and raise a white flag.

If he could thus, we suppose, lure the enemy into his power, he might yet save the commonwealth. Presently, the gallant commandante placed his trumpet to his lips and bellowed:

"Que buque?"

"No sabe Espanol" was the reply which came back across the water as from another world.

"Ship ahoy! Que bandera? bravely persisted Don Jose, determined to know the truth, however unpalatable.

"Americana!" came from the schooner.