

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Courting in '49

Christmas on board the "California" in 1849 was far from gay, according to a notation in E.L. Williams' diary.

As the steamer, historic because it carried the first mails to California and later brought the first postmaster to Monterey, left San Diego and proceeded up the coast, it was soon Dec. 24.

The passengers appointed Mr. Williams a committee of one to ask the captain for a box of raisins from the store to put in the next day's rice for a Christmas pudding.

He smilingly assented, reported Mr. Williams.

The captain called the steward aft and gave him the necessary order. The captain was told that the passengers would carefully take all the weevils out of the rice, but he replied that he thought more weevils than raisins would be found, and it was so.

"On the 26th we were steaming along near the shore of Pinos (Pine Point) after leaving behind us Point Cypress," wrote Mr. Williams. "As we went along, I thought, 'Never have I seen such a beautiful view,' as the land sloped down to the sea covered with bright green, interspread with trees a most lovely sight, all being lighted by the early sun.

"Soon we were in front of the old town of Monterey; the anchor was dropped and my voyage ended. Dec. 26, 1849, myself and my baggage consisting of my blankets that had done me such good service, and my hammock were put into a boat with the mail bags, and I, the only passenger for Monterey, was landed at a point of rocks opposite the Custom House (Larkin Wharf).

"From there I made my way to Joseph Boston's store (my cousin who had sent for me). Our meeting was a most pleasurable one. He had left New York three years before, and I could tell him all about his relatives and friends."

After being in Monterey some months, boarding with a native family, Mr. Williams found that the Spanish customs were greatly different from those of New York. A young woman was not permitted to be alone with the other sex, he wrote, nor to appear on the street unaccompanied by some much older person of her own sex.

A young lady might be seen going to church, or returning from church, but to address or walk with one was not permitted.

Mr. Williams observed that if you went to the home of one young lady, your visit was assumed to be to the older folks only, and you were received by them with great politeness and formality.

If you asked after the young lady, you would be informed that she was well but busy and would not see you. "The old folks did not retire on your appearance and leave you with the young lady as you do nowadays, I am informed," wrote Mr. Williams in 1903.

You ask how, under these conditions, courtship was carried on in 1849. Mr. Williams writes thusly:

"I answer, at the dances. There was always dancing at one house or another; then the swain would softly press the hand of the fair one, it perhaps would be returned; thus emboldened, he would whisper in her ear during a waltz and finally offer himself and receive in reply a low and modest 'yes'. The next day he would go to the old folks and they would assent or dissent, as the case might be.

"I boarded in the house mentioned more than a year. There were four girls who served the table, but they never appeared alone. They always came in pairs, like shoes or gloves. Fifty years later I dined at the same house at the same table in the same room and was waited upon by one of the same girls, then a buxom, rose-cheeked lass, now a gray-haired woman yet unmarried.

"And now my story is told. I put out the light and say to all 'Good night.'" So ends Mr. E.L. Williams' diary of his journey from New York to Monterey in 1849.