

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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La Perouse Visits Monterey

Four years before the Royal Presidio Chapel was built, Governor Fages and Dona Eulatia, his wife, gave a ball in honor of the great French scientist, M. La Perouse. It was the first reception to a foreign visitor ever given in California. Jean Francois de Galaup La Perouse had cast anchor in Monterey Bay on September 14, 1786—180 years ago.

Perouse had been sent out by the French government to make scientific explorations in remote parts of the globe. The expedition sailed from Brest. After doubling Cape Horn, La Perouse explored the western Coast of North America as far north as 60 degrees off the coast of Alaska, opposite Mt. St. Elias where he landed on June 23, 1786. After meeting severe storms there, the expedition turned southward, and 69 days later he landed at Monterey.

One of the reasons for the sending out of the expedition had been orders from the king to study and report on their exact conditions in these newest colonies of Spain. How well Governor Fages succeeded in making the scientists stay pleasant, is best told in La Perouse's own words:

"Cattle, garden stuff and milk were sent aboard in abundance. The desire of servicing us seemed even to disturb the harmony between the commander of the two vessels (government frigates) and Governor Fages. Each was desirous of providing exclusively for our wants; and when the amount was to be discharged, we were obliged to insist on their receiving our money.

"The garden stuff, milk and poultry and the assistance of the garrison in wooding and watering were offered free. The cattle, sheep and corn were charged at so low a rate that it was evident an account had been presented to us merely because we had insisted upon it.

"Now as to the place itself. Monterey Bay, formed from New Years Point to the north and Point Cypress to the south, presented an opening of eight leagues in this direction and nearly six in depth. To the east the land is low and sandy. The sea rolls to the foot of the sandy dunes which border the coast and produces a noise which we heard when more than a league distance. The lands to the north and south of the bay are elevated and covered with trees.

"The Spanish vessels which make a long stay at Monterey usually come within six fathoms of the shore and anchor in the sand. There are many whales. The sea is covered with pelicans."

On Sunday, September 15, 1947, M. Andre Rousselet, vice-consul of the Republic of France at San Francisco, came to the Peninsula and unveiled a plaque commemorating the visit here, September 14, 1786 of "Jean Francois Galaup, Count de La Perouse" placed at Carmel Mission. The plaque was a gift from the French government.

Luncheon followed the solemn high mass and the unveiling. Casa Munras in Monterey was the gathering place for the 35 French-American organization members of San Francisco and Oakland, as well as members of the California Historical Society who were the co-sponsors with the French government at the ceremonies.

At the conclusion of the luncheon, M. Rousselet presented bronze medals cast in France at the same time as the plaque, to the officials at the speakers table, Carmel Martin received the medal for Monterey, which should now be on display in Colton Hall, in charge of the Museum Board.

Another honor to La Perouse on the Monterey Peninsula took place in Pacific Grove Museum at the 10th anniversary celebration of the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History. On that date, December 3, 1909, a stone was placed at the foot of the tree in the ground, naming it La Perouse Cypress. La Perouse and his staff of scientists made careful observations of the geographical, biological and other scientific facts concerning the region. His journal was sent back to France, together with various collections, including seeds, dried plants and shells from Monterey Bay region.

The last letter from the ill-fated commander was dated February 7, 1788 from Botany Bay, near Sidney, Australia. Sailing from that port no more was heard from the expedition until 1826, when it was learned by the English Captain Dillion, that the vessel had been wrecked in a storm on a coral reef off Valikors, an island lying north of the New Hebrides, and all on board were lost in 1788. In 1709 a few relics of the party were found there.