

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'You Can't Die In Monterey'

"You Can't Die in Monterey" is an apt title for a delightful new-old book, "Bound for Sacramento," travel-pictures of a returned wanderer translated from the German by Ruth Frey Axe. The book was printed as a limited edition of 450 copies by Saunders Studio Press of Claremont and is a reprint of an original volume written by Carl Meyer in 1855.

The introduction tells the reader that Meyer was probably a German Swiss and was evidently highly educated, but why he came to California he does not state. He reached Monterey on the "Sarah Elisa" in the early part of July 1849 and after a few days here proceeded to Alisal where he was the guest of William E. P. Hartnell.

The author begins his chapter on Monterey by calling the town "California Paradise" and writes that it had the following inscription on its portal: "quien quierre morir, que se vaya, del pueblo," which when translated means: "He who wishes to die should go from this town."

"The climate of Monterey," he reported, "is so healthy and there is only one death to six births and only one doctor is needed for 3000 souls. Actually, at the time of my arrival there was only one doctor who assured me that during the whole summer only one important case of illness occurred among the natives."

He described his walk between the scattered vine-covered buildings on his way to find food. Everything was ready in the California Hotel. The aroma of the meal was wafted toward him and his companion of the ship, Dr. Whitefield, and a group of Mexican troubadours were waiting to entertain them. He reports that the landlady, Senora Petronella, was willing to put kitchen and cellar with all appurtenances at the disposition of her newly arrived guests.

"We found cordiality on all sides and observed that although the European was still a stranger to Monterey he was much liked there. Otherwise surely, we could not have been favored, right on the first day, with an invitation from the former alcalde of the city, Mr. Hartnell, who placed his house at our disposal so that we should enjoy resting in it for as long as we liked, and who would have been insulted by a refusal of this invitation.

"After we had obtained an ineffacable picture of the old California coast city we proceeded to his rancho, Patrocinio del Alisal, situated about 20 miles from Monterey."

His description of Monterey's waterfront is much as it looked a few years ago. "Monterey, seen from its calm harbor, resembles a bird niche around which circled flocks of pelicans, sea-ducks and sea-gulls who undisturbedly pursue their hunt in the bay for fish. Bounded on the south by a pine-covered slope, on the north by a flat garden-covered plain, and on the east by cool forests, the town gives ample evidence of the priests' sagacity in the choice of their dwelling places. Besides several churches and the garrison, the city has no prominent buildings."

To the visiting German, Monterey appeared as a pleasure-loving place. He thought the inhabitants alternated between piety and amusement. Those who were wealthy, he wrote, were happy and reached a very old age, spending their time visiting fairs and fandangos. The words "mucho Diveritissimo" (much pleasure) were uttered by all their well-wishers as they rode from the city with Hartnell to his California estate in the carriage to which "four lively ponies were spanned."

When they reached the ranch buildings at Alisal a group of Hartnell's family appeared. Without further ado they embraced the visitors one by one in the manner customary in the land, Meyer wrote, welcomed them cordially and called them their desired guests and placed the house at their disposal. This was a Mexican custom which was not merely empty etiquette but showed expressively the liberality which was not to be found in any other land.

"The European speaks for himself as 'your most humble servant,' the Californian calls himself 'your Friend' and really upholds this relationship" — so Carl Meyer, the author, compliments his new-found friends.