

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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School in Hawaii For Californians

Youthful Californians seeking education in California before 1850 were either sent by their parents to the East Coast, a long hard journey, or to the Sandwich Islands, another lengthy trip. In Honolulu there was a famous school known as Punahou or Oahu College, as it was once designated. The 100th anniversary of that school was celebrated in 1938.

The history of early education in California, strange as it may seem must include the school in Honolulu, for some of the best known families in the days of the forty-niners, and immediately preceding them, were sending their sons and daughters to the Islands, 2,100 miles away, for their primary and secondary education. Included in this number was the first child born of American parents in California.

Manifestly parents would not break home ties with children tender years and send them across the waters to a foreign land unless there were strong reasons for doing so. The truth was that there were no American schools in California in 1840 to which parents according to their own statements, could send their offspring. Striking evidence of the above fact is revealed in the famous Larkin papers, valuable treasures of the Bancroft Library of the State University.

Thomas Oliver Larkin, a native of Massachusetts able, courageous, spiritually minded, endowed with keen business acumen, had come to Monterey in 1832 and set himself up as a merchant in the city. At that time, the Mexican era, it was the capital of California. Monterey was probably the most important coast city of its day, a port for ships and a rendezvous of traders, bustling with social activity engaged in by men and women of remarkable beauty, it attracted Larkin as an ideal place to make a home and to go into business.

Over his home presided his gracious wife, who made the Larkin house a center of hospitality, as did her granddaughter the late Mrs. Harry Toulmin. The merchant's business prospered and he was honored as a leader in community affairs.

But Mr. Larkin was disturbed in mind concerning the education of his children of whom Thomas Oliver Larkin Jr., was according to Bancroft, born April 18, 1834, the first white child born of American parents in California.

In one of the father's earliest letters he laments the fact that Oliver, at the age of six had learned so little English that the father could not even talk with his son as he would like to do.

Other American families in California in 1840 and in the years immediately following, were in the same predicament. From Bancroft one learn that there had been schools held intermittently from the year 1794 under the Spanish and Mexican regimes. Most of them were of short duration and instruction was in Spanish. Ferrier in his "Ninety Years of Education in California" states that "there were only two schools in California at the time of the American occupation in 1846 and they were immediately abandoned by their teachers."

The perplexity of the problem was increased by the fact that in 1840 no railroad transportation to Eastern schools was available. Parents shrank from risking the lives of their children in the known hardships of the journey by overland trails, by water and land over the isthmus route, or by vessel around Cape Horn.

The news began to drift in to Larkin and other parents in California, brought by sea captains plying the Honolulu-California trade routes that good schools were available in the Islands. In 1938 there was printed a bulletin at Pomona College by Charles T. Fitts, professor of education there, in which he reviews much of the history of education in California.