

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Mystery of the Natalia**

Was the Natalia a British ship or a French vessel? Was it the ship which carried Napoleon to his exile at St. Helena or the ship on which he escaped? Was that ship wrecked at Monterey? These are the questions which frequently have been asked by residents and tourists alike.

I have found among some old clippings given by that late Mrs. Mille Birks before her departure from the Peninsula to make her home in Southern Oregon, an account of a swimming exploit by Frank E. Mauk, about 80 years ago, during which "he came into possession of a rib from the vessel in which Napoleon escaped from exile on the Isle of Elba." When Mr. Mauk told the story in San Jose, he was 86 years old.

At that time a story was being told in San Francisco papers concerning a ship's figurehead which antiquarians sought to identify as having adorned the prow of a British frigate Natalie, which they thought bore Napoleon to exile and the death on the Island of St. Helena.

Mr. Mauk declared at that time that he did not know whether the figurehead actually was from the vessel or not, but he did know that the vessel was not the Natalie, but the Natalia, a French vessel and not a British vessel. It was not the ship which carried Napoleon to St. Helena but the ship in which he escaped from the Island of Elba for the mad hundred-day military adventure which ended with Waterloo and his permanent banishment.

Displaying a piece of wood polished to a brown, almost black, Mr. Mauk told the reporter at the 1933 meeting in San Jose, how he acquired this piece of wood from the Natalia.

"I'll tell you how I got this. I was sent to Monterey in 1879 to take charge of the Southern Pacific Railroad station there. There was a whaling station in Monterey then and Joe Pedro in charge of the station, pointed out to me the wreck of the Natalia partly submerged, lying some 60 years off shore. From him and others in Monterey, I learned that it has been wrecked almost a half century before. The story was that it was in charge of Capt. Rund, its hold loaded with wheat. The captain

and his crew left the vessel to attend a ball in Monterey, leaving the ship in charge of a watchman.

"During the night a 'norther' came up, pulled the ship from its anchor and washed it aground, wrecked and a total loss. Capt. Rund never returned to face the owners, but stayed in Monterey. Thereafter he was known as Captain "Trigo," Spanish for wheat. The vessel, all accounts agree, was that in which Napoleon escaped from Elba in 1815.

Mr. Mauk determined to have a piece of the wreckage, and so, one fine day he put on a bathing suit, hung a coil of rope, over his shoulder, and swam out the 40 or 50 feet. He described how he tied the rope to one of the ribs of the old hulk and jerked and hauled until a piece some 10 or 12 feet long broke free.

As he struggled up the beach who should be meet but A.C. Bassett, then superintendent of the Southern Pacific who had just arrived in his private car. After inquiring what he had, Bassett asked. "Do you care much for it Frank."

After all it was his bread and butter he was talking to, he said, and so he answered: "I don't know that I do." So he listened while Bassett ordered the section hands to put the piece of water soaked wood in the private car.

Sometime later a baggage-man by the name of Pat handed Mauk a package and told him it was something from Mr. Bassett. It was the piece of the polished wood he had cherished ever since—for 53 years.