

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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III-Mannered Pioneers

When the pioneer line of mail steamers in the Pacific Ocean under the management of William H. Aspinwall began operation in 1849, no one foresaw how soon or how profoundly events in California would affect its fortune.

Although gold had been discovered more than eight months before the California left New York, and although accounts of its extent had been published all over the East, the news had caused little excitement about the sailing of the steamer. When she left port her cabins were empty; no through passengers were aboard for California and the ship carried less than half a dozen passengers of any sort, according to the published reports.

The Falcon, under the management of the Atlantic Company, had been at sea three days when President Polk issued his proclamation authorizing an annual subsidy of \$290,000 for a line of steamers with semimonthly sailing between the New York and Chagres. Then at last the belated scramble began, according to Oscar Lewis' "Sea Routes to the Gold Fields." In New Orleans the half-empty cabins were filled to their utmost capacity. She reached the Isthmus in mid-December with 200 passengers aboard, all but a few bound for the gold fields.

In the early stages of the rush for California and the gold fields there was much discussion as to the number who had left the East for the West after the news reached them and the beginning of the excitement.

In the earliest stages of the rush the number going around Cape Horn exceeded those crossing at Panama by more than two to one, and this proportion held through the spring and early summer of 1849. After this, as the hardships were eliminated one by one, a steadily greater number took the shorter faster crossing. By the middle of 1851, three out of every four traveling between the two coasts crossed either at Panama or Nicaragua.

The California left Panama on Feb. 1. Not only was the voyage slow, it was full of variety. Five stops were made before reaching San Francisco; one was at Monterey. Both at Acapulco and Mazatlan passengers went ashore en masse, partly to see the country but mainly to forage for provisions. One passenger, Elisha Oscar Crosby,

wrote: "The steamer was also replenished with everything that could be procured in the way of fresh provisions, such as vegetables, fruits, live beef, sheep, pigs and poultry."

Monterey was reached on February 24, and there a new difficulty arose. The ship reached this port with the supply of coal in its bunkers practically exhausted. While the passengers roamed about the town, crew members went into the thick forest on the hillsides, where they foraged for fuel to keep steam in the boilers during the final hundred miles of the journey, wrote Hubert Howe Bancroft in the "History of California."

This went on for three days; then after huge stacks of wood had been assembled on the Monterey beach and some of it carried on board, a reserve supply of coal was found in bags under the storeroom floor.

The mail—the first to reach Monterey direct—had been delivered and received by an anxious population. Then the passengers were summoned on board the California and on the evening of the 28th the journey was resumed to San Francisco. It was the next morning that the now historic vessel passed through the Golden Gate, ending the first steamer voyage between the two coasts.

Bayard Taylor wrote of this first journey to California that the avidity with which this shipload of pioneers descended on the tables at meal time aroused his wonder but not his imagination. Two meals were served daily, breakfast and mid-day dinner. At the first tinkle of a bell all hands started as if a shot had exploded among them; conversation was broken off in the middle of a word; the deck was instantly cleared and the passengers, tumbling pell-mell down the cabin stairs, found every seat.

When platters of food were placed on the table, he continued, the speed with which it disappeared amazed him. "There was a confused grabbing motion for a second, and lo, the plates were cleared. A chicken parted in twain as if by magic, each half leaping into an opposite plate, a dish of sweet potatoes vanished before a single hand; beefsteak flew in every direction."

But the mail had been brought through to California from the Atlantic to the Pacific despite the gold rush, lack of food and fuel, and the manners of the pioneers.