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DANA'S POINT

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DANA'S POINT

California, in the thirties, under Mexican rule, was still a colonial fringe on the fabric of North America. It had few contacts with the outside world. Overland, little-traveled roads led to the east and south. By sea, however, the world and its products came more readily to the dons and padres. In this maritime traffic, California became but one of a number of Pacific trading points; others included the west coast of South America, the Sandwich Islands of the South Seas, and China.

Ships from England, Russia, Holland, and Italy shared in this trade, but no small part of it came under the control of the Yankees from Boston - shrewd traders with clean, slender ships operating at low costs, who would "carry coals to Newcastle, if Newcastle wanted them" To California they brought every conceivable kind of manufactured goods - clothing, cutlery, hardware, crockery, furniture, tinware, crapes, silks, shawls, whiskey, tea, coffee, sugar, spices, raisins, molasses, jewelry, boots and shoes from Lynn, calicoes and cottons from Lowell, - "... in fact, everything that can be imagined from Chinese fire-works to English cart-wheels...." From California they took otter and beaver skins, and, most important of all, hides to

supply the shoe manufacturers of New England.¹

This trade reached its peak in the decade of the 1830's. One of its most memorable heritages has been the account written by a young Harvard student, Richard Henry Dana, who shipped as a sailor on a "hide-droghing" vessel in 1834. As a first-hand story of sea adventure and description of California life under the dons, Two years before the mast, first published in 1840, is a landmark in American literature.

In August, 1834, Dana embarked on the brig Pilgrim, sailing from Boston to California by way of the Cape of Good Hope. He returned on the Alert two years later with definite views of the unjust and harsh treatment meted out to the American sailor. From notes taken on the voyage, he wrote out his "lively, fresh, and unconventional narrative," aiming to secure justice for Jack, the forecastle hand.²

Dana was on the California coast from January, 1835, to May, 1836. During that time he visited all the important ports - including Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Pedro, San Diego, San Juan Capistrano and San Francisco.

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1. R. H. Dana, Two years before the mast, 81, 299; S. E. Morison, The maritime history of Massachusetts, 1753-1860, 268.
 2. E. F. Edgett, "Richard Henry Dana" in Dictionary of American biography, V, 60.

As the store of hides, or "California bank notes," became exhausted in one place, the traders would move on to a new reserve, always welcome for their stock of the world's goods. The hide boats were not only California's department stores, but they also supplied a means of coastal travel. Dons, señoritas, padres, and Indians - all looked forward anxiously to the visits of the gringos.³

On one of its coastwise trips, the Pilgrim stopped to trade with Mision San Juan Capistrano. The brig anchored opposite "... a steep hill which overhung the water, and was twice as high as our royal-mast-head." Inasmuch as the shore was rocky and exposed to the southeast gales, anchor was dropped in twenty fathoms of water and the ship's boats were used to make a landing.

"San Juan," Dana wrote, "is the only romantic spot on the coast." For several miles along the shore a high table-land breaks off in a steep escarpment against which the waves of the Pacific constantly dash. The only landing place was a small cove which provided, when the tide came in, a few square feet of sandy beach at best. The whole scene impressed Dana with its grandeur and solemnity, its silence and solitude.

3. Dana, Two years before the mast, 57-303, passim.

Not a human being but ourselves for miles, and no sound heard but the pulsations of the great Pacific; and the great steep hill rising like a wall, and cutting us off from all the world, but the 'world of waters'! ... Compared with the plain, dull sand-beach of the rest of the coast, this grandeur was as refreshing as a great rock in a weary land.

Dana spent an hour in such contemplation, reveling in the freedom from close contact with human beings which he had known on the Filerin. But there was work to do, hides to get aboard ship, and goods to bring to shore. So, after the agent had made trading arrangements with the mission, the Yankee crew towed in their long-boat filled with goods. His captain ordered Dana and another sailor to climb around and up the cliff. Jumping and scrambling, picking their way through briars and prickly pears, they reached the summit. The country stretched out before them, as far as one could see, a level surface broken only by the "small white mission of San Juan Capistrano, with a few Indian huts about it, standing in a small hollow, about a mile from where we were." Below, looking down the perpendicular height, the sailors

That walked upon the beach
 Appeared like mice; and our tall
 anchoring bark
 Diminished to her cock; her cock a buoy
 Almost too small for sight.

The hides were brought out from the mission in ox-carts and piled along the edge of the cliff. From there they were thrown down, one at a time, to the beach below,

where the sailors picked them up, swung them on their heads, and carted them to the boat. The skins were all large, stiff, and doubled so that the wind took them and "... they swayed and eddied about, plunging and rising in the air, like a kite when it has broken its string.... It was really a picturesque sight: the great height, the scaling of the hides, and the continual walking to and fro of the men, who looked like mites, on the beach. This was the romance of hide droghing."

Nevertheless, it was not entirely romance, as Dana was to find out. About six months later the Pilgrim returned to San Juan for another load of hides. This time several skins were caught in recesses of the cliff and could not readily be dislodged. Being worth twelve and a half cents a pound in Boston, however, they were too valuable to both captain and agent to be allowed to go by default. Halyards were brought from the ship and Dana volunteered to descend the cliff by them and thus free the hides. It was a perilous journey, but he got down safely, albeit covered with dirt. Jack, watching from the beach, was contemptuous of the foolhardy student for the venture: "What a d-d fool you were to risk your life for half a dozen hides!"⁴

The place where these events occurred has been

4. Dana, Two years before the mast, 147-150, 216-217.

named after Dana. The short stretch of sand where the Pilgrim's boats were beached is known as Dana's Cove. The protruding rocks on which the hides caught as they were thrown over show life only in the roosting of countless seagulls. The steep cliff, known as Dana's Point, stands unchanged, with the "world of waters" still beating and spuming against its passive flanks.⁵

Dana's greatest monument, however, must remain his book. For many years it served California as one of her principal means of being brought before the outside world. Twenty-four years after his voyage on the Pilgrim, Dana returned to California for a visit. In speaking of his book, he found that "... almost - I might perhaps say quite - every American in California had read it; for when California 'broke out,' as the phrase is, in 1848, and so large a portion of the Anglo-Saxon race flocked to it, there was no book on California but mine." Dana, one of the most eminent lawyers of his day, was not merely boasting when he wrote this. In the annual report of the New York Public Library in 1847, Two years before the mast stood second in the list of favorites.⁶ Considered by many competent critics as the

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5. Aubrey Drury, California: an intimate guide, 65; Trowbridge Hall, California trails, 29.
 6. Dana, Two years before the mast, 403; The Cambridge history of American literature, II, 399.

best sea narrative in American literature, Dana's book appealed to all ages; children and adults alike found it fascinating reading. Along with Herman Melville's work, it gave the Jacks of the United States their representation in literature:

... In those far days when every sea was bright with the American flag, when the cotton-white canvas shone star-like on the horizon, when the nasal laugh of the jolly Yankee tar in China found its echo in Peru,

the works of those two authors, apparently were:

... the first to lift the hatch and show the world what passes in a ship's fore-cas-tle; how men live down in that gloomy cave; how and what they eat and where they sleep; what pleasures they take; what their sor-rows and wrongs are; how they are used when they quit their black sea-parlors in response to the boatswain's silver summons to work on deck by day or by night. 7

7. Cambridge history of American literature, II, 401;
Fred L. Patee, A history of American literature, 152-153.

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