

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

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Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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The Historian & The Commander.

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In February of 1874, the historian, Hubert Howe Bancroft, sailed by steamer with his daughter Kate and friend Henry S. Oak, from San Francisco to New Town San Diego.

California's preeminent historian and librarian came south to meet Judge Benjamin Hayes of Old Town in hopes of purchasing his books and manuscripts on historic California—a collection that Bancroft claimed was “by far the most valuable in the state” with the exception of his own.

Bancroft's diary, *Personal Observations*, provides a vivid but jaundiced description of Old Town. He dismissed the place as nothing more than “a heap of adobe ruins.” “Everything about it is old and dilapidated... (even) the graves are so old and rickety that the dead can hardly rest in them.” He compared the abandoned hillside presidio to a place that “now has the appearance of some ancient earth works.”

On the second day, he visited Judge Hayes, whom he described as “a small shriveled-up man, approaching sixty, ragged and rusty in his apparel,” who lived in an “old adobe house” (the Casa de Carrillo) with a floor “carpeted with dirt.” “Papers and books (were) stowed away in trunks, cupboards, and bookshelves in luxurious confusion.”

He described Rufugio Argüello, Juan Bandini's widow, whom he would later meet at the fashionable Pico House in Los Angeles in hopes of purchasing her husband's papers, as “this portly Mexico-California relic.” He referred to her step-daughter Arcadia, who had married Abel Stearns, the wealthiest man in Los Angeles, as a “sweet señora of the million dollars....graceful for one so fat...”

No one, rich or poor, American or Hispanic, seemed to escape Bancroft's literary angst except Albert Seeley, whom he met on February 25, when his daughter, friend, and he caught the 11 o'clock stage out of Old Town from the Cosmopolitan Hotel to Los Angeles.

Although Bancroft left no record of his impression of the

hotel, his diary does describe in surprising detail the trip out of Old Town in a Concord stage driven by Seeley. Bancroft mentions that they were ferried across the San Diego River, then swollen from winter rainstorms, by boat, while Seeley drove an empty mud wagon across the river. He called Seeley “our courteous commander,” noting his attentiveness and expertise with horses.

A short distance from the river, the passengers were transported from their “comfortable covered wagon to an open one” coming from the opposite direction. The commander, sensing inclement weather, gave the historian a thick woolen blanket.

Once in the lighter wagon, it suddenly began to rain, and Bancroft, his daughter, and friend took shelter under a “sagged blanket” until they changed wagons and drivers about 3 p.m. Early that evening, they arrived “wet and cold” at Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside, where they ate a meal of fish, stew, and oak-leaf tea with milk before traveling on to Mission San Juan Capistrano, their overnight stop.

