

Millie's Column

Salty Tales Of Old San Diego

By Millie Robbins

"THEY CAME By Sea" is a pictorial history of San Diego Bay. It is not, as author Jerry Mac Mullen states in the preface, a history in terms of command ceremonies or civic banquets.

It does not tell about the social significance of the tuna industry, supply tables of statistics on cargoes or revenue from tide-land leases.

Rather it endeavors — to use Mac Mullen's own words again — to plug up some of the holes left by those who in bygone years apparently felt nothing of interest occurred from the arrival of the seaborne elements of Don Gaspar de Portola's expedition in 1769 until the Navy began to fly cloth-and-bamboo aeroplanes on North Island.

(The book, published by the Maritime Museum Association of San Diego and the Ward Ritchie Press commemorates the bicentennial of the Spanish explorer's advent in California and the founding by Father Junipero Serra of the Mission San Diego de Alcalá, first in what became a chain of 21).

O.K. If you crave statistics get them elsewhere, or try to. Mac Mullen warns that gathering material was not easy. No formal port records were kept in early days. Local newspaper files are indexed only through 1879 and then from 1930. This eliminates most of San Diego's lusty days when the city literally was brought in piece by piece by sailing vessels and lumbering side wheellers.

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A MAJOR PORTION of the book, of course, consists of the more than 200 old photographs that give the flavor of life on the waterfront of the once struggling little port, on through the years when it served the entire Southwest as a large fishing and shipping center, and as a Navy town.

The pictures of all manner of venerable craft and the men who sailed them undoubtedly will give nautical buffs a charge.

But Mac Mullen's text is so lively and entertaining that even benighted landlubbers who can't tell a sloop from a schooner and are completely baffled by such esoteric terms as skys'l-yarder and stuns'l boom will find it enjoyable reading.

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CONSIDER THE chapter titled "Fast-Buck Boys from Out-of-Town," for instance. This concerns the slippery Yankee traders who came to San Diego at the beginning of the 19th century. Many with cock and bull stories about their ill and dying crews repaid the hospitality of the inhabitants by exterminating most of the sea otters in the vicinity, swiping cattle and otherwise being obnoxious.

A fascinating footnote to Richard Henry Dana's classic "Two Years Before the Mast" is contained in this section. On the brig Pilgrim out of Boston, Dana arrived in San Diego in 1835 (which, by the way, he pronounced the best place for landing and taking on hides in California) and later wrote about his experiences.

"For generations people read that book unaware of the fact that they had been short-changed" wrote Mac Mullen. "It seems that some pious busy-bodies edited Dana's work rather heavily, excising those passages which had to do with the frequently sulphurous diction of the Pilgrim's people; various forms of trick and devise while getting to windward of the Mexican Customs Service, and such touching scenes as the one of a priest coming home by burro . . . utterly stoned."

In 1961 Dr. John Haskell Kemble, history professor at Pomona College, got his hands on the original manuscript and the result is a two-tone volume. Printed in black is what Dana's squeamish relatives and friends left in, while the hitherto expurgated material was restored in brown ink.

"Some of those brown ink passages are lovely" observed Mac Mullen.

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Y ARNS ABOUT smuggling — everything from Chinese, cigars, and matches to guano — down to the rum-running days of Prohibition are given in the chapter aptly headed "Hanky Panky."

Tales of riots and roistering among the tars, blue jackets, railroad and lumber men in Stingaree, the town's dive-and-dancehall ridden counterpart of San Francisco's Barbary Coast, are told in "Sailor Trouble."

Links with local establishments and persons are numerous. For one thing many a ship that figured in San Diego Bay's background was built in these parts.

Then San Francisco capitalist John D. Spreckels, who had extensive shipping interests, went to the area in 1887 and changed the course of history. He built the first long wharf to handle heavy commodities, and soon owned much real estate in downtown San Diego, two daily newspapers, the street car system, the Hotel del Coronado and the Coronado ferry.