

Journey to San Francisco

By Eliza W. Farnham

[Eliza W. Farnham, who promoted social reform, became matron of the women's section of Sing Sing Prison in 1844. Despite the improvements she made, her liberal views brought her into conflict with other staff members and she was forced to resign in 1848. That same year, her husband (Thomas Jefferson Farnham), who practiced law and had a freight business in California, died suddenly in San Francisco. In 1849, at the age of 34, Eliza Farnham sailed to California to settle her husband's estate and start a farm, or as she called it, a rancho. El Rancho La Libertad was located in Santa Cruz County. She farmed there with her children and her friend Miss Sampson (Miss S.) for more than five years. Sometime during that period, she was joined by her former assistant matron at Sing Sing, Georgiana Bruce Kirby (Geordie). In 1856, Eliza Farnham wrote a book of her experiences called *California, in-doors and out*, which was published by Dix, Edwards & Co. in 1856. The following is an excerpt from her book, pp.72–77.—RAP, ed.]

We had been but little more than a month settled before it became necessary for me to go to San Francisco, on which journey Mr. Anderson very obligingly undertook to be my escort. Miss S. was to remain in charge of affairs at home, and especially to take care of Eddie, the great object of anxiety to us all, as his health seemed to have failed since we had been at Santa Cruz. The journey was to be made on horseback, and the road for the first day lies across the range of mountains that skirts the coast. We set out with formidable preparations of lunch, fire-arms, etc., Mr. A. carrying two revolvers, and each of our horses having a satchel of provisions in addition to those of clothing. A habit-skirt, which I was assured I could not wear through the mountains, was packed conveniently, that it might be put on when we reached the inhabited regions on the other side.

The road across these mountains is stern and solitary in the extreme. Portions of them are heavily wooded with the enormous redwood which abounds here. One tree especially is pointed out by the cicerone, which is said to be 403 feet high. The valleys and many of the gentle slopes are fertile, and produce the wild oat and some varieties of clover in abundance, but immediately succeeding them we get precipitous cliffs of shale, in which the mule-path is so deep that rider and horse are swallowed up, and so narrow that there is only room to ride through without brushing the sides of the chasm. On either hand you have heather wastes intermingled with flowering shrubs, many of which, in their seasons, are very beautiful. At this time all the more productive regions were spangling with the flowers common to the country, chief among them the escholtzia, purple and blue lupin, columbine, white and variegated convolvuli, fleur de lis, white lily, and innumerable smaller flowers of exquisite beauty, with whose names, being no botanist, I am unacquainted.

Something more than midway across, after all sorts of scramblings up and down rocky stairs, and through brush that has nearly torn your hat from your head, and certainly your spectacles from your face, you are quite surprised to find your horse treading a wagon-track, and riding farther on, you find in a large valley shut in by high hills, partly wooded and partly covered with oats and grass, a house and saw-mill. The proprietor of this valuable property is an emigrant from Ohio, who brought his family across the plains three or four years ago. He started with a company for Oregon, and says

that when he reached the point where the California trail diverged, he let his oxen choose which they would take. They turned southward, and the consequence is that he is now the owner of one of the finest timber ranches in the country, whose wealth his children's children cannot exhaust. So inadequate and fantastical are sometimes the influences that produce to us the most grave results.

From the first summit eastward in this range you get a magnificent view of the coast-table, the bay of Monterey, and the ocean; from the last you behold a portion of the bay of San Francisco, and the great valley of the Puebla de San Jose, lying spread as it were at your very feet - one of the most beautiful views conceivable. And as the eye dwells upon the fertile plains, in some parts thickly dotted with the ancient and picturesque live-oak, its branches laden with gray, trailing mosses, in others sparsely set with the same, and still others open and smooth as a shaven lawn, one readily imagines that the time is not long distant when from this mountain-top the famous pine-orchard view shall be rivaled. Cover the bay with sails and steamers, variegate the uniform green of the fertile plain with grain-fields, orchards, gardens, farm-yards, and houses; dot the sunny slopes with vineyards, and let the church-spires be seen pointing heavenward from among occasional groups of dwellings, and I know not what would be wanting to complete the picture, and make it one on which the heart and eye could dwell with equal delight. The valley itself, when you descend into it, though very pleasing by its smooth and open surface, is less beautiful to my taste than our own little rougher and brisker Santa Cruz. Advance a few miles from the foot of the mountain, and you have a monotonous level that lacks extent to give it grandeur - variety of any sort to give it everyday interest.

From the Puebla to San Francisco, a distance of sixty miles, almost the entire road is over a surface so level that you see the broad bay, that puts up between you and El Contra Costa, only as a belt of water. An occasional sail seems to be gliding along in the grass over the top of which you look. Yet a ride through the valley is one of the most charming in the country, so fertile is it - so adorned with the orchard-like trees that take on new forms in their groupings from every point of view by which you approach or recede from them. It only begins to be disagreeable when you reach the hills some ten or twelve miles from San Francisco, and grows constantly more so till you reach the same point on your return. Here the San Francisco winds meet you face to face, and search you like an officer of the customs. They grow more unpleasant till you enter the city, by which time you are thoroughly chilled and dampened by the humidity with which they have been charged. Your eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth are filled with the sand they have hurled at you, and you just begin to remember that out of Santa Cruz one must expect to encounter many disagreeable things that one has entirely forgotten the existence of in that delightful spot.

Sources

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