

A Sea-Port on the Pacific

By Mary Hallock Foote

[This article was published in the August, 1878 issue of "Scribner's Monthly." Through it, we can go back to the 19th century and "walk around" and "see" parts of Santa Cruz and its coastline as they were then. But the descriptions are not totally impersonal. We walk with a person who, naturally, has a particular way of interpreting what she sees; and whose point of view reflects both her own background and the conditioning of the 19th century society in which she lived.--Editor]

The whitish-gray sandstone cliffs rise above the breakers to the level of the breezy plain above; they are like an old sea-wall which the waves have shattered and crumbled, obliterating all but the massive original plan. I have seen old fortifications and earth-works with this half-premeditated, half-natural look. The sea working its way in, or little streams from the mountains working their way out, have left at intervals along the coast, long, bare headlands with bayous, or "lagunas," as they are here called, between them and the main-land; as they near the mouth of the bay they grow wilder, more ragged and wave-worn, with a thinner upper-crust of soil, and a harder under-crust of rock; often they are tunneled into natural bridges, through which the breakers plunge with a hollow roar. There will be a little sandy path following along the top, or two paths, one in use, and one that may have been trodden with safety a few years before, now perilously near the edge, or disappearing entirely in places, showing how rapidly the rock wastes away.

The yellow-white glare of these cliffs in the sun is strange to one accustomed to the sober gray ramparts and deep-rooted boulders, laced with wild vines, or figured over with pale lichens, of our eastern coast. The effect is brilliant, but one turns for relief from this immovable, solid brightness, even to the piercingly blue depths of the sky, or to the changing white foam-flashes. A colorist would rejoice in the luminous shadows which fall along these cliffs, bringing out all the purple, and red, and green tints, which the blinding light effaces; and if this shadow inclose a group of figures standing against the rock, how the faces glow, and every bit of white is cut out as clear and solid as on a cameo.

The light-house stands on one of these bleak promontories (I hesitate to say what an ugly little light-house it is;--it is most unaffectedly built, and I believe it answers the purpose for which it was intended; therefore, should it not be beautiful? but distinctly, it is not). From the light-house point, looking back, we see the little white town brightening the low tones of the landscape; all this glare at a distance has a tremendous depth and strength of color, against which the town shows as a flock of sheep shows on a sunny field. Its terraces and slender poplar spires and spots of dark pine shadow, the broad white beach, and the "composed" effect of the bay and mountains give it a foreign look. You feel as if a curtain rose on it; or, as if you had seen it through the frame of a car window, on some journey through southern Europe.

It is January, but the air has an Indian summer mildness, with its underlying chill also. The early rains have brought out a tender faint greenness, like a smile over the patient, brown hills. The path which we follow along the cliffs toward the town is fringed with budding willows, and a pale, downy-leafed lupine with a dark stem. We cross a stile, - an American, not an English stile, - and the path leads on to the high railroad bridge, from which we overlook the beach, the wooden piers wading out through the surf, the bath-houses, and "sea-foam restaurants," the "Plaza" and "Pacific Ave." horse-cars, and the unmistakably American crowd which eddies below.

As we go down the steps of the bridge, we meet a Chinese washerman shuffling up, with a basket of clean clothes, neatly covered with a sheet, balanced on his shoulder; it is Saturday, and the town is full of them, hurrying in all directions with the weekly wash. We take the red "Plaza" car and rumble off through a deep cut in the cliff, past the Chinese vegetable gardens in the suburbs of the Flat, as the lower part of the town is called, and so on, to the foot of a flight of steps leading to one of the streets on the "Hill."

Santa Cruz is sometimes called the Newport of California, but it is like calling the Hudson the Rhine of America or Joaquin Miller the Byron of the West. The padres in choosing this site for their mission had, no doubt, a comfortable belief that the best of everything was none too good for them; or they may have wished to enhance the virtues of abstinence and prayer by surrounding themselves with every temptation to live according to the flesh. The climate is certainly not favorable to asceticism. There is a breadth and intensity of light and color here; the flowers blossom recklessly all the year round; the flame-colored eschscholtzia that grows wild on the downs is twice as big as those in our gardens at home; even the white sand of the beach bears a delicate purple flower with a pale-green waxy leaf and a perfume which the sun and the sweet salt wind must have given.

The high, windy plain, which sweeps across from the first low range of hills to the ragged brink of the cliffs, has been compared to the English downs. It is a pity that fences and houses should ever interrupt the impressive monotone of these wide plains. In their summer brownness they make one deep, quiet chord of color, with the cliffs and the yellow-white line of beach; the sky and sea are another; figures walking between have an intensity of effect, like that prolonged high note in the "Lohengrin" overture, against the swelling crescendo of the violins. Nature here is rather unmanageable when you try to bring it within the range of human emotions and sympathies; it cannot be made to express subtleties or half shades of meaning, but there is a massive and savage grandeur, which would fitly accompany a drama like the "Nibelungen," or the unearthly harmonies of the "Lohengrin," where even the tones of passionate love and grief seem as if borne from far off, like that "tale of little meaning, though the words are strong."

The lines of the landscape are broad and simple. The terraces of the town, the first low range of bluffs, the dark, smoky, blue mountains beyond, rise and gradually step back, with stretches of plain between, like the circling seats of a great amphitheater, from the broad bright arena of the bay, - the Bay of Monterey, forty miles wide, into whose barriers the ocean pours its winter tides, lashed by the wild "south-easters." The storms here are warm with all their violence; the roaring of the surf, the tumult of the wind and rain are more like wild rough play than the wrath of nature, and the tides, which, when they swell, cover the long wooden piers with spray and shake them to their foundations, still, to me, have no association with fear or peril. This may be because during the season of storms the bay is solitary. No net-work of black masts and ropes and yards fringe the wharfs: there are no white sails or black smoke pennants traced on the horizon. In all the wide stretch of water, there is nothing human for the elements to harm.

The earliest voyagers along this coast seemed to have noted the mountains, especially from the fact of their being heavily timbered. Cabrillo first speaks of these "wooded mountains", and Viscayno, "exploring the coast more carefully in search of harbors," anchored in this noble bay, and gave it the name of his patron viceroy. I confess the names of Cabrillo and Viscayno are not as familiar to my ears as Hendrick Hudson, or Captain John Smith, or the valiant Miles Standish; but we feel quite at home with Sir Francis Drake, (1) who, in 1578, "sailed along the same track and without doubt, observed these same 'wooded mountains.'"

I quote from the historical sketch of Santa Cruz prepared for the Centennial by the Rev. Mr. Willey. He gives some interesting extracts from the diary of Father Crespi, a Franciscan priest, who accompanied the expedition to rediscover the Bay of Monterey. Viscayno had given a brave account of it, and "Governor Portala, Captain Rivera, with twenty-seven soldiers in leathern jackets, and Lieutenant P. Fages, with seven volunteers of Catalonia, besides an engineer and fifteen Christian Indians from Lower California," set out from San Diego in search of it. By the time they came to this spot they had almost given up their quest, and, like Cadmus and his brethren, where they rested, they founded a city on the shores of the bay, the existence of which they had begun to doubt.

Viscayno, in his good report of the country, had spoken of an infinite number of very large pines, "straight, smooth, fit for masts and yards; likewise oaks, thorns, firs, willows and poplars; large, clear lakes, fine pastures and arable lands." And Father Crespi prophesies, with a keen temporal eye:

"This place is not only fit for a town but for a city, without wanting any of the things necessary, with good land, water, pasturage, wood and timber within reach and in abundance, and close to Monterey Bay." [They had by this time verified the existence of Viscayno's bay.] "The town could be put a quarter of a league from the sea with the said advantages."

So here they founded the mission of Santa Cruz. They built the old church (its ruins are now roofed over, and protected from the weather by a dreary board sepulcher). But it was not only a question of souls, - they planted trees, - one thousand and twenty-two fruit-trees and eleven hundred and ninety grape-vines. Their flocks and herds increased and multiplied. They taught the Indians how to make adobes, and the use of such rude tools as were then known. The crop of beans was trodden out on a threshing-floor by the feet of oxen yoked by a stick across the horns, and winnowed by tossing it in baskets into the air.

When they ran short of provisions, in the very early days of the settlement, they were supplied by the soldiers with beans and corn to the value of \$42, "which value," the father in charge does not fail to mention, "was faithfully returned to the soldiers." The mission grew rich in temporal treasure as well as in souls. There were vessels of gold and vessels of silver, and priests' vestments, - a gold chalice was valued at \$608, two capes at \$1,200, and a priests' vestment, yet preserved, at \$800. Of the bells belonging to the mission two remain in use, and one large one lies broken and silent in the priests' garden. For twenty-three years the mission prospered undisturbed by outside influences.

The mild (2) rule of the padres faded away like an old moon at day-break. Their slow foot-prints have been trodden out of sight by all the busy feet crowding in. All that remains of them and their work scarcely furnishes one distinct outward feature of the place they created, and yet the parent sap still thickens the swifter current of new life springing out of it. The influence of the climate helps to perpetuate it in its soft, persistent protest against individual effort and self-reliance; and with all its softness, the climate here is as strong as fate, or a universal scheme of salvation. There is something almost tragic in the anxiety with which,

during the last dry months, the whole country waits the blessed winter rains. If they are withheld, all is gloom for another year; if they come in joyful abundance, the dread is past, the shops enlarge their "stock," smiling faces show the general relief, and everybody spends a little more money than, a month ago, he thought he could afford. It is all a matter of luck, or of Providence, according to one's belief, or lack of it; and in every society, those who recklessly accept their luck outnumber those who have learned to find a meaning, even in waiting. There is certainly a strong element of fate in the life of a Californian, - even the wide limits of the horizon, and the far-off meeting-line of sea, or plain, and sky, lead one's eyes away toward unknown possibilities, and teach one an impatience of wearisome details.

Several years ago the old mission church was shaken by an earthquake which startled the town. Its interior is a mass of ruins (horses are stabled in one end), and the entrance is entirely gone; only the long side-walls remain in somber massiveness to serve as the tomb-stones of the dead mission. From the street little can be seen except the boards which inclose the gable and roof, but the priests' garden is sheltered under the side-wall, which gives to it, with all its greenness and growth, a character of heavy quietness, as if only the life of the past haunted it. The blossoms of a yellow acacia touch it here and there half shrinkingly; there are pigeon cotes, a whole colony, built against it, where the afternoon sun strikes warm. Two small windows piercing its massive crust show nothing but blackness within, - black holes laced across with thongs of raw hide, after the manner of an iron grating.

There is a still, brown pool of water in the priests' garden; the sunlight only touches it in gleams, for it is roofed by the green canopy of the grape-arbor which covers half the garden. The huge parent vines, coiled like brown serpents up either post of the piazza entrance, look as if they might be as old as the mission itself. The calla lilies which border the fountain seem all the whiter in this green gloom, and, rising above the water, are reflected in it like pale gibbous moons. A pine-tree throws its mass of shadow across the sunny space between the grape-arbor and the church wall.

Late in November there are days when the air is still and lifeless, and the clouds shut heavily down: it was on such a day that we first went to the priests' garden. The grape-arbor was bare of leaves, and through the cordage of stems overhead the dull sky looked down. Father Adam (there is a familiar sound about the name) talked with us a little while, and then went away and walked up and down the path beside the church wall reading a little book. The white pigeons were flitting about past the shadow of the pine-tree or perching on the brink of the pool. It all seemed strangely unreal and yet familiar, as if I had read of it long ago or seen it in a picture. It must have been the old gray wall, the smoky green masses of the pine-tree, and Father Adam in his black gown walking and reading to himself. And the pool was fascinating in its still opaqueness: those cold, white lilies, - what fellowship could they have with its secrets!

Another day, when I visited the garden, one of the sisters from the convent was there gathering flowers, - for Our Lady's Chapel, perhaps. She was a Spanish sister and spoke very little English, so we could only smile at each other. Her eyes were as dark as the pool, and her cap as white as the lilies. She had rather a heavy face, but there was a gentle dignity about her that suited her dress, and she looked very happy with her hands full of flowers. Another lady, in a dress of the world, had also a bouquet. I should like to have followed them into the chapel for which their offerings were intended.

It would be impossible to imagine anything more unlike the general impression eastern people have of California than this new street of the little fields, - these low-porched houses and little gardens ranged side by side with paths and grass-plots, and chaste picket-fences. You might fancy yourself in the cold, peaceful

atmosphere of a New England village were it not for the gardens which the picket-fences inclose. These gardens always remind me of the people, - such a heterogeneous mass of transplanted life growing and blooming together, more or less prosperously. A botanist separating them according to their nativity would scatter them to every corner of the world. Even to the unlearned they offer a strange mixture of associations. English violets hide in the grass beneath the sculptured stem of a yucca palm, round which clings a passion-vine, its heavy purple blossoms drooping among the saber-like leaves which spring from the plinth of the palm. The shadow of a huge prickly pear falls across the white New England fence; it was planted about twenty-five years ago, and its broad, spiked leaves are printed with the initials of youths and maidens belonging to the new generation,- the young Californians. The Lamarque rose, which covers our porch with its thicket of shining green, has a stem like a strong man's wrist. It scales the pillars and storms the piazza-roof, tossing its white blossoms about in the wind; we can see them from our upper windows like a surf against the blue sky. There are flowering shrubs from New Zealand and the Sandwich Islands; tall plumes of pampas-grass, yew-trees and fig-trees; old-fashioned pied wall-flowers, japanese lilies, and pomegranate blossoms. The bright-eyed narcissus will always have a new association, since the Chinese "New-Year's Day," when the washermen carried them about the town presenting them to their customers, - the blossoming bulbs arranged in a dish of water, with pebbles heaped around them filling the dish and supporting the flower-stems.

There is a bed of chrysanthemums round the corner of the house, in the shade. Their bitter-sweet breath is strong with home memories. I wonder how they can gather its pungent fragrance in this mild air, if they miss the still, keen November nights and the cold kisses of the early snows.

It is November here, but not the November of the East. I walk up and down the grape-arbor at the K-'s, and see how the sky looks in through the widening spaces in the leafy roof. There is a smell of ripening grapes. The dead leaves curl and drop. They have the same rustle as on still fall days at home, but there is something missing. We seem to be always skipping a season here. Now, in late November, the fields are getting softly, tenderly green, as in early Spring. We found wild roses growing along the sandy paths by the shore. It is lovely, surprising; but there seems to be always something we are waiting for - something left out!

You should see the innocent parade of baby-wagons on the street during the sunny hours! This is a wonderful climate for babies, as well as flowers, and after sunset until dark there is a cheerful fizzling of garden hose in all the neighboring gardens. One fancies that the air suddenly grows cool, moist, and perfumed.

There are many trees in the streets of the town - great-grandchildren, perhaps, of the "oaks, thorns, firs, willows and poplars " Viscayno saw, but he did not see the delicate feathery pepper-tree or the Eucalyptus (Australian gum-tree), which shows its pale bluish-green foliage here and there. It is always "out of tone," and looks as if seen through a fog, or with a hoar-frost upon it. Its long leaves flap instead of flutter, and show a silver lining. I respect the old brook-willows which mark the winding chanel of the "San Lorenzo," but the weeping willows have no bones in them. They are all a loose wash of pale green, like a bad watercolor drawing.

The poplars stand up firmly, lightly poised against the deep blue of the sky; they are all yellow now on top, as if the sun touched them: the locusts let all their leaves drift down light and slow, and in their bare, rugged outlines keep the sentiment of the fall.

The town made its beginning in a quiet way, down on the "Flat," then climbed the hill to enjoy its leisure with a "view," and refuge from the business streets. Almost all the streets on the hill end in a flight of wooden

steps, leading to the "Flat." This is one of the pretty features of the town, - these unexpected little stair-ways, sometimes long and straight, sometimes short and crooked, almost all with a landing in the middle and a bench to rest on. We cannot help wishing, that the hospitality which put these landings and benches here, with their mute invitations to stop and rest, could be perpetuated in something more lasting than boards.

In some old stone mediaeval city, what richness and gloom of mellow time-stains, sharp angles of shadow, splashes of color and smoky lights, would gather around these little stair-ways! They would be worn into hollows, and have a look as if the whole human race since the flood had trodden them. The flight at the end of our street has a bench on top, from which there is a charming view over the house-tops to the Monterey Mountains across the bay, and the gray line of the sea, out beyond the light-house point. The trees blow about the white gables and gray roofs at sunset, the windows all sparkle up brightly, the mountains grow darkly blue, and the sky glows with a golden pinkish color. A level light falls across the nearer hills, and the tall poplars, lifting their yellowed tops, look as if they too shared in this last joy of the hills.

For the first two months after we came, the Monterey Mountains were hidden by a haze, and the sky had that luminous indefiniteness which I have seen in some old engravings after Turner. The bench is best on moonlight nights (there is a good deal of quiet competition for it by the young people of the neighborhood, on these occasions), or at twilight, when the whiteness of the houses fades into the gray, and nothing is left of the town but its clustered lights, its spires and softly stirring tree-tops, its wide encircling sweep of mountains and that dim stretch of cloud, or fog, or water which we feel, rather than see, is the ocean. In still, summer weather, the daylight noises of the town almost drown the surf, but when the tide comes in at midnight, and the wind rises, all the living sounds and voices are lulled. Then, if you are wakeful, you can hear its hoarse, loud sigh, dying into murmurs faintly repeated in whispers along the shore.

The convent is only a few streets and corners distant. We can hear the bell ring for early mass. I sometimes meet the sisters, walking, almost always two together, in their heavy dark gowns and stiff white caps. It gives us quite a traveled, Old-Worldly feeling to talk of going round by the convent and the fig-tree. The convent was once an old hotel, and could never have been picturesque in any capacity; and the fig-tree is an aged "buck-eye." The mistake was made by a young lady from the East, whose knowledge of fig-trees was entirely theoretical. We always call it the fig-tree, and have forgiven it long ago for not being one. It couldn't help it, any more than the convent can help its dead white glare and its blank prospective of piazza. A double piazza extending along two sides of a house is so suggestive of life and enjoyment, - it gives me a chill to pass these empty white galleries, where no one ever walks or leans over the railing, or smiles down to a friend below, or looks out at the mountains. The yard runs back on a little street which ends in the usual flight of steps; there is a long whitewashed wall which in some way reminds me of the sisters' caps; the trees show over the top, crowding out into the sunlight. Through a little door in the wall I see, in the afternoons, a troop of children pass out; first in a long string, then scattering apart singly or in little groups, like bright beads rolling away when the string is broken.

The stairs leading from the little convent street are old, crooked, and unfrequented. They overlook some queer back-yards and balconies, with plants in boxes and clothes hung out to dry. There is a Chinese washhouse with its sign, "Jim Wau," illustrated by a picture of a large and not un-Christian-looking flat-iron. It may be that Jim, himself, with his pig-tail neatly wound round his head, sits in the door-way, smoking. The stairs are built against the wall of a high garden; looking up, you see its tangled vines and shrubbery, and one tall superb clump of pampas-grass; its blossoms are like silver flames with a core of gold; they lightly wave to

and fro on the long reed stem like torches, paling in the sunlight. On a gray, windy day, - one of the first cloudy days which herald the early rains, - we walked along the top of the cliffs to the light-house point. I had only seen the beach in broad sunlight, and the effect of that darkly curtained sky was unspeakably restful, - no one can know how restful, who has not known seven months of unmitigated sunshine! You could throw your head back and look up, - you could open your eyes wide and gaze long and far!

There was a long, pale streak of light, where the dark curtain lifted to show the meeting line of sky and sea; there were gleams on the wet sand, on the seagull's wings, and a broad white gleam where the hissing foam spread fast up the beach, or swam dizzily back with the retreating wave, - you could follow the curves of the beach by its white flashes, - it was like that robe of Samite, "mystic, wonderful," flung up on the shore in fleecy folds, and then withdrawn by unseen hands; or, like the shroud the weird sisters washed in time of trouble.

A wrecked schooner lay on the beach before the light-house, with her keel bedded in sand, her one remaining mast slanted at an angle of distress, and the surf breaking over her decks. "Active," was all of the name we could see. Farther-in-shore, below the rocks, lay the mast she lost in the storm, and two little bare-legged boys were balancing up and down its length, treading carefully, one foot before the other, swaying from side to side, with hands upraised and sun-bleached locks blowing in the salt wind. The kelp was strewn in wide swaths upon the beach, and a dead sea-bird lay on one of the dank brown heaps.

From the lighthouse beach we went on, climbing another stile, and following the narrow sandy path along the cliff to Roundtree beach. Here is one of the natural bridges and some fine masses of rocks carved by the waves. Above, what would have been the key-stone of the bridge, where the shadow of the rude arch is blackest, and the tumult of water rushing out of the echoing defile is churned into whitest foam, we saw a Mexican fisherman perched like an old water-fowl, waiting for his prey. His coat was huddled over his shoulders with the sleeves crossed in front; his head sunk forward, watching with silent intentness for the line which quivered down, a slanting thread of light, against the ragged parapet of the bridge.

Far down below, the water hissed and roared; sea-gulls flew in and out, and back on the bank above the old fisherman's head, lay a boy as silent as himself, a "muchacho," all in brown, - face, hat and clothes, as if he had grown out of the brown bank he lay on. They looked as if they had been for hours in the same place, without moving or speaking.

On our way home, we walked on the wet sand below the cliffs; the tide had just gone out, and the rocks for some distance above their base were a mass of life, - such dim subconsciousness as may quiver in a star-fish, or expand the oozy petals of a sea-anemone. The avalone [sic] shell is found clinging to these rocks; it has a tremendous power of suction, and is with difficulty detached from its hold. Its meat, when pounded tender and fried in steaks, is not unlike scallops; it makes a delicious soup. A Chinese fisherman at Soquel was caught by one, - a huge fellow whom he was prying off the rock. It held him in its clammy grasp until the tide washed in and drowned him. I wonder if he felt the ghastly ignominy of such a death.

The fishermen here are almost all Chinese or Italian. I saw a picturesque group of the latter dragging their seine-nets in through the surf at low tide. Their boats are rigged with a lateen sail, such as we see in pictures of the Mediterranean. The Chinese fishermen at Soquel live in a delightful huddle of shanties along the base of the cliffs. They build like birds or animals, and their houses, though dirty and squalid, are seldom obtrusive. They often show a curious ingenuity in adapting a commonplace means to an unusual end; a Chinese vegetable-grower on the Flat has defended his field by a *chevaux de frise* of tin cans of the square variety

opened and stretched out so the four sides form one long strip of tin, notched at the top, and nailed above an ordinary close boarded fence.

The houses at Santa Cruz distressed me at first by their painful whiteness and uprightness, which give them a Pharisaical air of virtue, quite incompatible with the broad and easy stretches of the landscape. The builders here built not in harmony with their new surroundings, but in memory of the old ones they left behind them. These are the white-gabled, steep-roofed houses that in the East are sheltered by hills and seen in prospective at the end of winding roads with deep tree-shadows across them.

The houses do not bear transplanting so well as the clean, upright, peaceful lives they symbolize. Good men and women harmonize, in the best sense, with any landscape, - they may not always be picturesque, - they are often not very happy, but it is good for the country that they are there.

Almost every settlement in California is more or less like the Basil plant, with old wrongs and tragedies clinging to the soil about its roots. Here the conflict of races, religion and land titles is not so far in the past that its heritage is entirely outworn. It is true that society in the West does not hide its wounds so closely as in the East, but is there not hope in the very fact of this openness? At all events the worst is known. The East constantly hears of the recklessness, the bad manners, and the immorality of the West, just as England hears of all our disgraces, social, financial and national; but who can tell the tale of those quiet lives which are the life-blood of the country, - its present strength and its hope in the future?

The tourist sees the sensational side of California - its scenery and society; but it is not all included in the Yo Semite [sic] guidebooks and the literature of Bret Harte.

Notes

- (1) We never can escape the ubiquitous Sir Francis. A quicksilver mine would seem an unlikely place to encounter him,--he could hardly circumnavigate that,--but we found him at New Almanden. One of the mining captains said he had lived near the old family-seat in Devonshire; there was a room in which hung a suit of Sir Francis's armor; the room was not frequented, because so much of the old gentleman's vigor still remained in his sword and gauntlet that anyone opening the door was unceremoniously knocked down by those lively antiquities. Captain Gray was very young when he heard this story.
- (2) The "tender mercies" of the mother church sometimes bore a painful resemblance to those of the wicked. One means of conversion employed by the padres was no doubt irresistible: "They sent out horsemen armed with the lasso, and by its skillful use the savages were caught and compelled to come

into church." They were also urged to the confessional by men standing in the church aisle armed with whips.

Source

Foote, Mary Hallock. "A Sea-Port on the Pacific." *Scribner's Monthly*, August 1878.

It is the library's intent to provide accurate information, however, it is not possible for the library to completely verify the accuracy of all information. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the library.