

## “Richard H. Dana and *Two Years Before the Mast*”

*For landing and taking off hides, San Diego is decidedly the best place in California. The harbour is small and land-locked; there is no surf; the vessels lie within a cable's length of the beach, and the beach itself is smooth, hard sand, without rocks or stones. For these reasons, it is used by all the vessels in the trade, as a depot.*

—Richard Henry Dana (1835)

*Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana Jr. is an American literary classic. The thrilling narrative of a voyage from Boston to the California coast in the 1830s was Dana's personal memoir of his time at sea—an account which prominently featured early San Diego.



Dana was a nineteen-year-old Harvard student who decided—after a bout of ill-health—to escape school for a time and go to sea. Embarking from Boston harbor on the 86-foot brig *Pilgrim* in August 1834, Dana sailed for the Pacific as a common seaman, determined to recover his health through hard work, and see California.

Seven grueling months at sea followed before the *Pilgrim* anchored in San Diego Bay on March 14, 1835. San Diego was “a small, snug place,” Dana wrote, but had “the best harbor on the coast.” It was also the hub of the California hide trade—a lucrative business that lured the *Pilgrim* and other New England ships to the Pacific coast to trade for cattle hides collected from California ports.

The base of operations for the hide ships was a depot at La Playa, an area of beach just north of Ballast Point. The traders had built large barns at La Playa to warehouse the hides. Thousands of these “California bank notes,” would accumulate in the hide houses before the ships left San Diego for the long return voyage to Boston.

“Hide-droghing” was hard work for the sailors but while in port there was also treasured hours of leisure. Dana happily described his first day of liberty, a Sunday in San Diego:

*Our crew fell in with some who belonged to the other vessels, and sailor-like, steered for the first grog-shop. This was a small mud building, of only one room, in which were liquors, dry and West India goods, shoes, bread, fruits, and everything which is vendible in California. It was kept by a Yankee, a one-eyed man, who belonged formerly to Fall River [Massachusetts], came out to the Pacific in a whale-ship, left her at the Sandwich Islands [Hawaii], and came to California and set up a “Pulperia.”*

After the grog-shop, Dana and a shipmate named Simpson decided to explore the countryside on two horses rented for the sum of one dollar per day:

*The first place we went to was the old ruinous presidio, which stands on a rising ground near the village, which it overlooks. It is built in the form of an open square,*

*like all the other presidios, and was in a most ruinous state, with the exception of one side, in which the commandant lived with his family. There were only two guns, one of which was spiked, and the other had no carriage. Twelve, half clothed, and half starved looking fellows, composed the garrison; and they, it was said, had not a musket a piece.*

The small town of San Diego lay just below the presidio. It was a motley settlement of “about forty dark brown looking huts, or houses,” less than half the size of Monterey, or Santa Barbara.

More satisfying to Dana was the mission of San Diego de Alcalá, which the sailors found “after a pleasant ride of a couple of miles.” The mission complex was built of mud bricks but “there was something decidedly striking in its appearance.” Dana was particularly impressed by the church tower with its five belfries, each with “a large bell, and immense rusty iron crosses at the tops.”

At the mission, Dana and Simpson were offered wine and a meal of “baked meats, frijoles stewed with peppers and onions, boiled eggs, and California flour baked into a kind of macaroni.” For sailors who had just spent seven months eating boiled meat and hard tack “it was regal banquet.”

Leaving the mission, the sailors returned to town at a full gallop. (“California horses have no medium gait,” Dana discovered.)

*Coming into the village, we found things looking very lively. The Indians, who always have a holy day on Sunday, were engaged at playing a kind of running game of ball; on a level piece of ground . . . men, boys and girls—were chasing the ball, and throwing it with all their might . . . . Several blue jackets were reeling about among the houses, which showed the pulperias had been well patronized.*

Two weeks later the *Pilgrim* left San Diego to collect hides at other California ports. When the ship returned in May, Dana stayed behind and spent the summer unloading ships, curing hides, and storing them in the barns at “Hide Park.” Many more days were spent exploring the country, meeting the people and learning their customs.

He would return Boston on another ship, the *Alert*, finally arriving in Boston in September 1836. His vigor restored, Dana returned to Harvard for his degree, and began a long professional career in law, with expertise in maritime issues.

*Two Years Before the Mast* was written, Dana said, “to present the life of a common sailor at sea as it really is.” A national bestseller when it was published in 1840, the book has never been out of print and remains today a splendid, first-hand account of life in early California.

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