

# The Diaries of Asa Cyrus Call

March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1850 - December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1853

Originally Transcribed by:  
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Edited by:  
**John & Vanessa Call - Dec. 1998**

The Winfield Scott

Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, 1853.

A rock in the Pacific, 20 miles from the coast - Monday,  
Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>, 1853.

I embarked on the Steamer Winfield Scott last Thursday, and  
at 12 o'clock we left Vally's St. Wharf for Panama.

We had fine weather till Friday evening, when it became  
foggy. One of the boilers had been leaking through the day  
which had retarded our progress, and the Sierra Nevada had  
passed us, but it was repaired on Friday afternoon, and we  
were running about twelve miles an hour, when I went to bed  
on Friday night. This was about 9 o'clock. I had just got  
to sleep, when I was awakened by a tremendous shock. I  
knew we had struck a rock and hurrying on a part of my  
clothes I hurried up on deck where I found a general panic,  
but the steamer was backed off and with the assurance that  
all was right the most of the passengers retired again to  
their rooms. But I didn't believe she could have struck a  
rock with such force without sustaining some injury, and

not knowing what the upshot of the matter might be, I went down to my state room and put my money and all other valuables in my trunk into my saddle bags, and went into the upper saloon intending to be ready for what was to come next. I had hardly taken a seat when the steamer struck again, and with such force, that it seemed as if the ship was breaking into a thousand fragments. I again hurried on deck, and went forward to see if I could see land. It was so dark I could see nothing, but I could distinctly hear the roar of the breakers ahead, and on the larboard side. The steamer was unmanageable, and the order was given to let off the steam and to extinguish the fires to prevent the ship's taking fire. The decks were densely crowded but considering the circumstances the people behaved remarkably well. It was a perfect jam. And all I could distinguish was an occasional small shriek as the ship lurched to one side giving evidence that she was sinking. About ten minutes after we last struck the long boat was lowered, and I heard the Captain call for the ladies to go aboard. Some men pressed towards the boat but the Captain's orders were "knock the first man overboard that attempts to get into the boat". Meanwhile some life preservers were got up and were being distributed among the passengers.

There was now a great breach in the steamer and the water was pouring in like a river. Our only hope was that she might not sink entirely, as we could feel her sliding down the side of a ledge of rocks. Pretty soon the fog began to break away a little and we could see the light in the long boat as she was coasting along in search of a landing. We could also see the top of a high peak just ahead of the ship and pretty near, but it seemed perpendicular and the white foam and the roar showed that we could never hope to land there.

As soon as the life preservers were distributed, the other ships boats (five) were lowered, and filled with passengers. They all held about one hundred and fifty, and there were five hundred and twenty on board. After being gone about half an hour the long boat returned, having found a landing. And in about two hours all hands were taken off, and were landed on a rock about fifty yards long by twenty five wide.

The next day we came to a larger rock or Island, about half a mile long by 100 yards wide. We have succeeded in getting provisions and water enough from the wreck to do us so far. The sea has been quite smooth, or we should have

been all lost. A boat went off to the mainland day before yesterday and returned last eve.

An express has been sent to San Francisco and I shall look for a steamer in three or four days. Robbery and plunder has been the order of the day since the wreck. But today we appointed a committee of investigation and have had everything searched. A good deal of property has come to light, and two thieves have been flogged. I have recovered a pair of revolvers, a Bowie knife, and some clothing, but I am a good deal out of pocket yet. But probably my other things never came ashore.

We are on short allowance, but I today shot a seal with my pistol, and we shall have a luscious dinner. We are expecting a schooner from the main land with supplies of water and provisions.

December 9<sup>th</sup> 7 p.m.

The old steamer California came to our rock sometime in the night last night, and made her presence known by firing cannon. We climbed to the top of the rock and made a large fire of weeds, which is the only fuel we have on the rock. The sea was very rough which made it dangerous getting on board, but we finally accomplished it without any very serious accident.

It is now supposed that there were one or two men lost when we were wrecked, as they have never been seen since. One was a Mr. Underwood, a butcher by trade.

December 10, 7 a.m.

It is cold and foggy this morning, and the sea is rough. I stand in want of my India rubber coat and several other things I lost on the wreck. We are now a little below San Diego.

December 11, 10 a.m.

It is pleasant this morn though the ship rolls a good deal. We had a stormy evening, and a good deal of rain. This is an old steamer and something under my stateroom creaked all night, which made me dream of wild cattle bellowing and grizzlys growling all night.

We passed a number of whales yesterday, and immense numbers of porpoises. The wind is ahead this morning, and I think we shall have more rain.

I find it very inconvenient to have strangers for room mates, as it compels me to wear my gold on my person, and twenty pounds is not particularly comfortable on ones breast, if it is gold.

December 12, 10 a.m.

A fine morning, lots of whales, wind aft, sails set. Passed a ship yesterday evening. See land occasionally. I have made the acquaintance of Monsieur Jouan, the Emperor Kurbidi's\* land agent, who is about to locate five million acres of land for his heirs in Lower California. I have a good mind to go with him. I think I might do well.

December 15<sup>th</sup>.

Fine day, here in the torrid zone, a little below Cape St. Lucas.- There is a crazy man on board who went down into the steerage last night and told the passengers the ship was sinking, "but" he says, "Keep cool, be quiet, don't get excited, it can't be helped, go up quietly". But they didn't keep quiet. In about two seconds they were all on deck, and then the panic communicated to the cabin, and we took our turn. The passengers are like sheep that have been stampeded a time or two.

I am homesick.

### Acapulco

December 18<sup>th</sup>.

We reached Acapulco yesterday at 2 o'clock a.m. and left at 12 M. Much of the Town has been lately shaken down by an earthquake.

I found much more that was novel and interesting than I had expected. The vegetation is altogether different than that of Cal. I know the names of but five trees, one variety has large yellow flowers, and green fruit, and ripe fruit all at the same time. There are a great many palm trees, and cocoa trees, and orange, and lime etc.

The streets are narrow and crooked and there is a blind beggar kneeling at every corner, and several lepers showing their disgusting carcasses, and plenty of old hags begging for the church and lots of little boys and girls with pans and curious baskets of coral and sea shells for sale, and if you decline buying they will urge you to take a trifle as a present, filling your hands and pockets exclaiming "yo presenta" "yo presenta" and afterwards they will follow you holding out their hands and whenever they can catch your eye, it is "one little pickyman." They have learned so much English.

And there are plenty of baths where bright eyed senioritas officiate, as "uno peso no mas" and all seem to derive their whole support from the California travel.

The harbor is small, but very secure. The shore is bold, the town is shut in by high hills, and not a breath of wind can ever reach it unless it blows directly down from heaven.

The weather is hot and sultry. With nothing on but cotton pants and linen shirt, I am sweating like a fireman.

December 19<sup>th</sup> 1853.

It is cool and comfortable. We had a strong breeze last eve and the sea was rough. Something in the engine got out of fix in the night and we stopped for two hours. We are crossing the gulf of Tehuantepec<sup>1</sup>.

December 21<sup>st</sup>.

The sea is very rough. Our old steamer labors terribly. The wind nearly ahead and we get along, but slowly.

They got up a sail this morn thinking it would hold the ship more steady, but the wind soon tore it to shreds. I think we have rather a hard voyage.

A man in the steerage died today, and was buried in the sea. Poor man, the hope of collecting a little sum with which he might return to his childhood's home had sustained him for four long years through toil and disappointments,

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and now when he was thinking that in two weeks more he would be at home with the means to make his home comfortable and happy, he had to die. Poor man.

December 24<sup>th</sup>.

We are now almost to Panama. Yesterday the Captain gave us a champagne dinner, and we gave him a testimonial, and raised 250 dollars to present him a memento. Capt. LeRoy of this steamer and Capt. Blunt of the Winfield Scott are Gentlemen but Capt. Doll of the Columbia in the same line is a puppy.

### Christmas on the Chagres River, Panama

December 25. Christmas.

This is a day of sufficient importance to justify me in beginning a new page. I am at Cruces, at the head of boat navigation on Chagres River. All is excitement and hubbub, but I presume we shall all go on tomorrow, and nothing will be heard further. We have today come across from Panama, 24 miles.

The road was infested by robbers. No one molested me and my two companions. We were mule back and well armed. One man was knocked down and robbed, one man was murdered and left in the trail. Wells and Fargo's express messenger and his two companions were attacked but made their escape by running. There are a good many stories afloat, several persons are missing. One native who attacked a man has been identified (so said) and arrested. The natives are collected all around, perhaps 2,000. About 20 passengers have been to me to borrow arms. I have but two pistols and a knife. I have loaned one pistol to my friend Cervara, a native of Yucatan. At this moment I hear a man under my window say another heavy robbery, a man seized, choked his pants shirt and belt ripped, gold taken, great times.

We had a little war in Panama last night, passengers drunk, etc.

December 26<sup>th</sup>, Barbacoas, 11 a.m.

I have just got down from Cruces. We chartered a boat and had a pleasant trip. One boat was capsized, and several

men lost all they had. It is an old trick of the natives. If they had capsized our boat, the steersmen would have been shot on the spot.

### Heading Home Aboard the Illinois

December 27<sup>th</sup>.

We are at sea, going north, towards home. Thank fortune, we got aboard of the Illinois last night at dark. The railroad is uneven. Aspinwall is in a swamp, every place stinks. No man but a fool would stop there to live.

December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1853 3 p.m.

Very pleasant, water smooth, Jamaica in sight on our left and St. Domingo streaming away on our right.

I am excited, full of strange enthusiastic feelings. We see that Island now as Columbus saw it 360 years ago. The same, and yet how different. What a glorious country our fathers have created since then. I am full of Pride and hope and enthusiasm.