

ALFRED ROBINSON

BY H. D. BARROWS.

In the recent death at San Francisco of the venerable pioneer, Don Alfredo Robinson at the advanced age of eighty-eight years, sixty-six of which he had lived in California, we are reminded that the last member of that notable first group of Argonauts who settled in California about the year 1830 has passed away. Col. J. J. Warner, who was born the same year as Mr. Robinson (1807), and who reached California soon after the arrival of Mr. Robinson, died also in this same year in which the death of his friend took place. Very few, indeed, even of the second group who came a decade or more or less later, now remain.

Mr. Robinson was probably one of the best known, both by Californians and Americans, of the early English-speaking settlers; and he was held in high estimation by all who knew him, for his thoroughly sterling character.

He was born in Boston in 1807, and he died in San Francisco October 19, 1895. He made several trips to the West Indies whilst yet a boy; and at the age of twenty-one he sailed as shipping clerk on the "Brookline" from Boston, bound on a trading expedition for distant California, where he arrived in February, 1829. The "Brookline," of which Capt. Wm. A. Gale (father of the wife of Col. J. J. Warner) was master, and Bryant & Sturgis, of Boston, were owners, brought probably one of the largest and best assorted cargoes of miscellaneous goods that had ever been offered to the Californians. Mr. Robinson remained in California, acting for some years, as agent of the Boston firm, which sent him out.

In 1846 he published anonymously his "Life in California," giving an account of his voyage, and of the quaint, primitive life of the inhabitants of this then isolated province of Mexico, as he found it in those early days. This book, a copy of which is in our Public Library, will be found to possess an extraordinary charm for those who take any interest in early California annals. It is a standard work, and is followed by most writers who treat on California history, or of the period extending from 1829 to 1842. His intimate business and social relations with the best people of the Territory afforded him excellent opportunities for the acquirement of accu-

rate information. His duties as agent for the Boston firm required him to travel more or less up and down the coast, from San Diego to San Francisco, to bargain for the purchase of hides and tallow, and for the sale of goods. He also purchased otter skins; buying, he says, about 3000 in one year, which he sent to China, the best of them being worth \$60 apiece.

In the early part of 1836 he married Anna Maria, a daughter of Captain Jose de la Guerra y Noriega of Santa Barbara. In October of the next year he sailed with his wife for Boston by way of Honolulu on the "California," James Arther, master. He left his wife in Boston, in order that she might acquire an English education, while he made another trip to California in 1840, resuming his former agency, remaining till December, 1842, when he went East again, on the American ship "Alert," via Mazatlan, carrying dispatches to the U. S. Government from Commodore Catesby Jones; and also taking gold dust from the placers in this county, which had been discovered the year before, to the Philadelphia Mint, for Don Abel Stearns.

From 1848 or '49 he became the agent of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. It is said that it was mainly owing to his advice that that company decided finally to locate in San Francisco, their preference being Angel Island, Mare Island, or Benecia. After selecting the latter site and spending a large amount of money there, contrary to his advice, they at last concluded to purchase their present location in San Francisco, which is but a very small portion of the donation which the city had previously offered through him to the company gratuitously, the same property now being worth several millions of dollars.

In after years Mr. Robinson acted for a long time as agent for the extensive Stearns estate of this county. Mrs. Robinson died in 1855. I remember seeing her that year when she came here on a visit. She was a splendid looking woman, then in the flower of her youth, and possessing all the characteristic charms that distinguished the Noriegas.

The elaborate account given by Dana in his "Two Years Before the Mast," of the ceremonies of the grand wedding at Santa Barbara is in fact an account of the marriage of Mr. Robinson and Senorita de la Guerra y Noriega. There were born to this union eight children, of whom but one, a son, I believe, is now living. The Noriega family was one of the most prominent in California in the early part of this century.

Mr. Robinson witnessed the transition of California from a

sparsely settled province of Mexico to a great State of this Union of nearly a million and a half inhabitants. He saw the gradual changes from the mission era to the pastoral period; from the pastoral to the mining, from the mining to the agricultural and horticultural and commercial epochs, from the Spanish to the Anglo-American regime; from the dominance of Mexican to that of American laws, and from the principal use by the people of the Spanish language, to that used by the Anglo-Saxon races. Indeed, but very few of the present residents of California have any idea of the wondrous changes he saw, from the time the ship in which he came 65 years ago entered the placid waters of San Diego and San Francisco bays, until his death last month in San Francisco. Of all those of mature age, men or women, Californians or foreigners, whom he found here on his first arrival, very few indeed have survived him. The scenes in which he participated and the actors thereof, have passed away, and seem to us of today, almost as unreal as the unsubstantial stuff which dreams are made of.

Mr. Charles R. Johnson, also an early pioneer and still a resident of this city, is a nephew of Mr. Robinson.