The Juan Bodega Story, Chapter 4: Disaster Strikes!

by Robin Rudderow, RBHS Historian

Having left Trinidad Bay, in what later became Northern California, on June 19, 1775, the two ships from San Blas, Mexico continued their northward exploration. Our hero, Juan Bodega, captained the 37 foot schooner Sonora, and Bruno de Hezeta captained the 225 foot frigate Santiago. They were at 41°N latitude. Their orders were to go to 65° N. They still had a long way to go. On July 9, while in the latitude of the strait of Juan de Fuca, a squall snapped the main topmast of the Sonora, causing the ship to "turn on her beam ends"; the ship heeled (leaned) over so far that the horizontal timbers (beams) were nearly vertical. She was in imminent danger of capsizing.

Father Campa's journal described the scene:
We went along with the ... wind, the ruler of these seas, which now made the waves curl and spew foam. In the morning some said they saw land, though indistinctly. By noon we were at 47° 36'. In the afternoon there was a much stiffer wind and a raging sea. The schooner labored heavily and those aboard thought they were like to perish: more canvas had been spread, to make speed; then, after the main topmast had sprung, a gust of gale force made her lie over, and although sail was taken in she was still in danger. But as Divine Providence disposed, a wave that broke in the masts and sails righted her, and although some water entered the hold and damaged the provisions there was no serious loss.

On July 11, the sailors sighted the coast of Washington. The Sonora sailed close to shore, looking for a safe harbor at the place now called

Grenville Bay, at 47.3°N. Bodega unknowingly sailed over sand banks, then realized he was in shallow water, and signaled for the Santiago to stay back. The Santiago anchored in some turbulent seas.

Father Campa's journal describes that night:
We suffered from the severe rolling of the ship, the danger that the topmasts would give way. No one was able to close his eyes and get a little sleep.

The next morning, peoples from a Quinault village came out to meet the sailors, who gave gifts of glass beads, pendants, and kerchiefs. The natives returned with fish and pelts for exchange, and the Spaniards perceived "gratitude and friendship" in the invitation to spend the night in the village, which was declined.

Hezeta made a brief landing for a possession ceremony, while Bodega made ready to sail to the Santiago once the tide was high enough to move over the sand shoals. He sent a crew of seven men to shore to gather wood and water. Bodega's journal tells what happened to the men:

As there was some swell to the sea, they were not able to get ashore with all stability and so as soon as they began to step ashore, all of a sudden 300 Indians came out of the woods and finding the men defenseless assassinated them treacherously. As I was without any means to help them, I ordered a few shots fired to see if they would frighten [the Indians], but they paid not the slightest attention since the shots could not hurt them. Just as useless were the various signals for help I sent the frigate, as the distance was too great for them to be seen.

Five of the landing party were killed on shore. Two dove into the surf and were consumed by the waves. This left Bodega, in addition to himself and his pilot, Francisco Mourelle, with a crew of 5 healthy men and a boy to sail out of the shoals. The wind was low, and Bodega was greatly alarmed when nine large canoes carrying more than 30 native men approached the ship. The approaching natives made signs of friendship, but had bows at the ready and were shielded by thick animal hides.

Bodega's crew were busy trying to get out of the shoals, leaving Bodega, Mourelle and the boy to defend the ship with muskets and swivel guns. One boat of 9 natives attempted to board the ship at the prow. Bodega recounted that he opened fire with two swivel guns and three muskets, peppering them in such a way that we gave them no time between volleys. They paddled to escape with great swiftness. However, their skill was to no avail, as the first shots killed the greater number of them and the others quickly covered themselves with their leather skins. [6 were killed.]

Bodega rejoined the Santiago and immediately boarded it with Mourelle to report to Hezeta. Distraught and angry, Bodega asked for thirty men to go ashore to "seek the most severe satisfaction for such an abominable atrocity and to be sure of the fate" of the two sailors lost in the surf.

Hezeta's instructions did not allow him to use force except for self-defense. Further, with so many of the sailors already sick with scurvy, he would have to give up the expedition if he were to loose any more men. Bodega's request was denied. Heavy of heart for the loss of his men, Juan Bodega set sail again, still northward.

Before the tragic events at Grenville Bay, Hezeta had sent word to Bodega to come for a meeting to discuss whether "the schooner should continue the voyage to a higher latitude since at every moment he [Hezeta] feared we would perish with seas and winds such as we had experienced on the 9th and the 11th."

Bodega's journal reflected his response:
This news did not surprise me, as from the beginning after leaving San Blas they have taken great pains to dissuade me from such an undertaking and urged me to return to port, trying to make me believe that it was impossible to reach a latitude higher than Monterey. I consider it to be of greater merit that I have not paid any more attention to such mournful predictions of the inconveniences and exertions I have undergone and await me in such a lengthy voyage.

Bodega and Mourelle were adamant about wanting to continue. On returning to the Sonora, Bodega wrote to Hezeta that when they left San Blas and he was encouraged to return to port because the Sonora performed so poorly, he declined to go back, citing his duty to the King.

I have reached latitude 49° without having had any reason to oblige me to put into harbor. Now on this occasion and with greater reason, I must be of the same opinion, having experienced such severe seas and winds, and I am certain that I can lie to without suffering the least damage. Even though [the Sonora] heels over and water [washes overboard], the former will always occur with every small ship and the second is not all that consequential as the deck is completely covered.

Its speed with the sails I have had added does not differ much from that of the [Santiago]. And finally, I am obliged to reach 65° as I have reached 49°. The labors I have experienced and expect are fundamental to every navigation, especially to explorers, and must be accepted with resignation and fortitude as they are for the King's service and the honor of the nation.

Bodega's letter predicted that the Santiago could not successfully complete its mission without the Sonora's ability to go closer to shore. He stated his belief that the voyage should continue, and closed with "it would be an unbecoming affront to my nature to abandon the mission without serious reason."

Hezeta's second in command, Juan Perez, who had captained the first exploration of the Pacific northwest coast the year before, agreed with Bodega that the journey must continue. Hezeta relented, and transferred six seamen to the Sonora to make up for those lost at Grenville Bay.

On July 19, Hezeta sent word that too many of his crew were sick with scurvy to continue the voyage. Bodega replied that although most his crew was "in wretched health and tired after four months of navigation to which they are not accustomed", he urged that they continue until it was certain that the sailors would not recover.

Reluctantly Hezeta continued, but it was far into the sailing season, 65°N was still far off, and the Sonora was slow and in bad shape. More sailors were falling sick every day, raising the concern that there wouldn't be sufficient crew to get home. Bodega and Mourelle were certain that Hezeta had decided to turn back.

On July 31 a fierce storm of strong wind and high sea separated the Sonora and the Santiago. While Bodega and Mourelle put in their official reports that they spent several days looking for the Santiago, in truth they had decided to continue alone, and their separation from the Santiago was planned and not an accident.

LORENZO GALE

Lorenzo Dow Gale, born: 26 Apr 1828 Franklin County Ohio, died: 18 Jul 1907 Sonoma County California, married: Eliz Wilfley 10 Feb 1848 Scotland Missouri (born: 7 Jul 1830 Quincy, Adams, Illinois, died: 11 Apr 1916 Petaluma CA) children: Otis Sheldon 1849, Cordella Ann 1851, Sarah Jane 1853, Emmeline 1854, Lucretia 1857, Mary Ellen 1859, Alice 1861, John William 1865

When Lorenzo Dow Gale was born in Franklin County, Ohio, his father, Richard, was 29 and his mother, Mary, was 30. He married Eliza Ann Wilfley on Feb. 10, 1848, in Scotland, Missouri. They had eight children in 16 years. He died on July 18, 1907, in Healdsburg, California, having lived a long life of 79 years.

L Gale

in the 1860 United States Federal Census

Name	L Gale
Age	32
Birth Year	abt 1828 [abt 1828]
Gender	Male
Race	White
Birth Place	Ohio
Home in 1860	Bodega, Sonoma, California
Post Office	Smiths Ranch
Occupation	Dairyman
Personal Estate Value	25

Spouse & Children

Eliza Ann Wilfley
1830–1916

Otis Seldon Gale
1849–1933

Cordelia Ann Gale Brown
1851–1936

Sarah Jane Gale Robinson
1853–1932

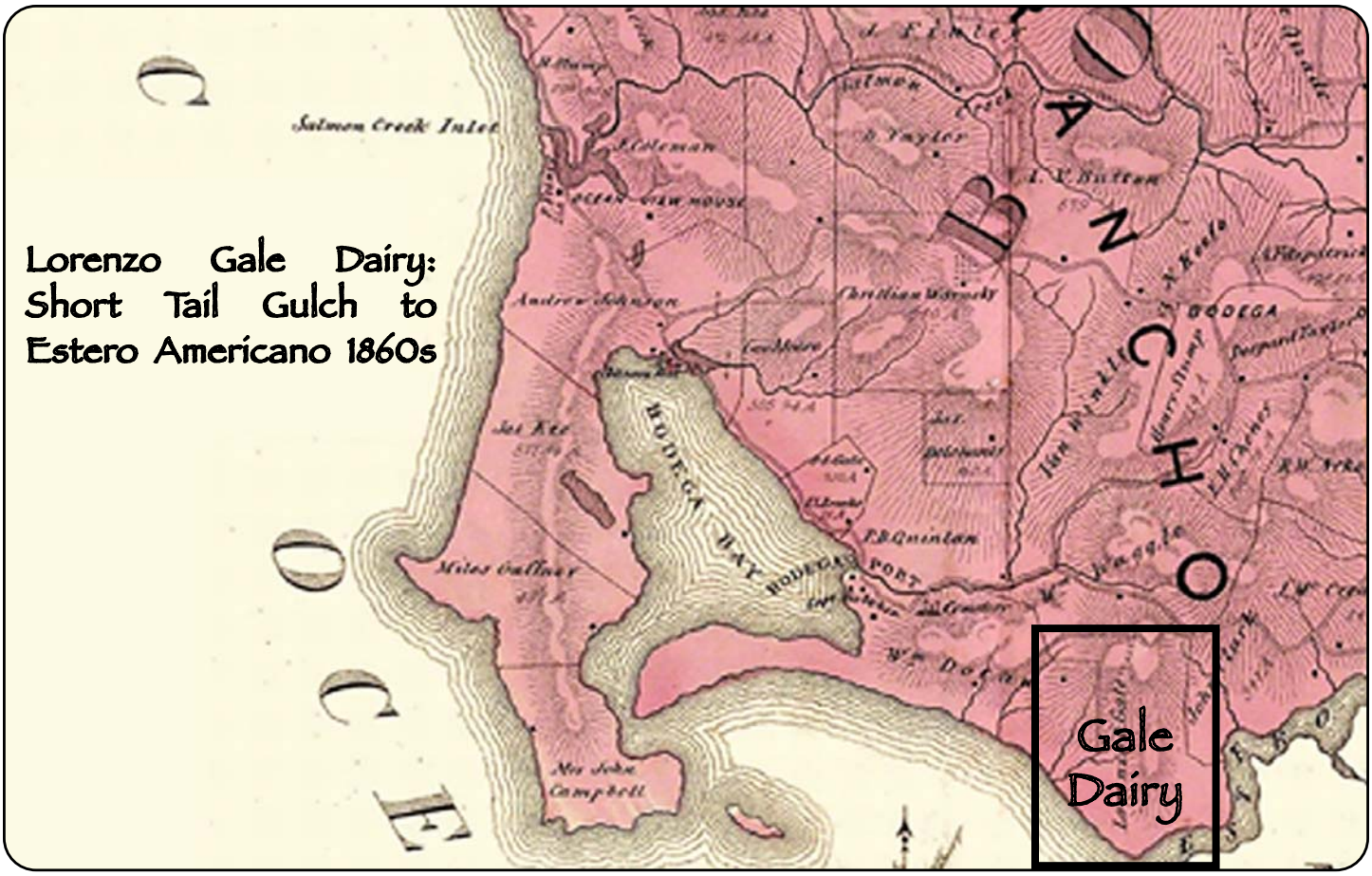
Emmeline Gale Fine
1854–1945

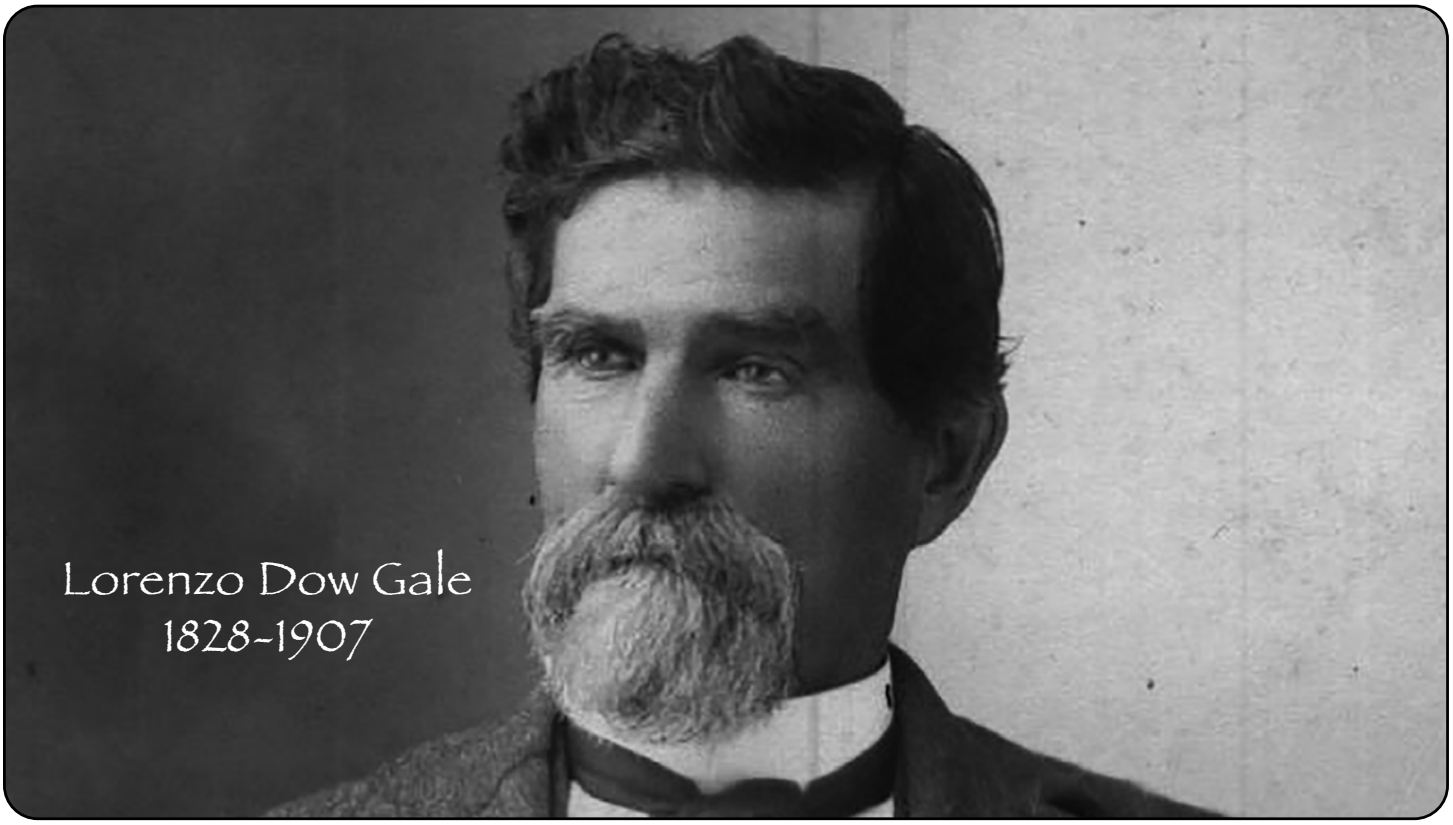
Lucretia Gale Ayers
1857–1947

Mary Ellen Gale McPhail
1859–1946

Alice Gale Woods
1861–1927

John William Gale
1865–1867


Lorenzo Gale Dairy:
Short Tail Gulch to
Estero Americano 1860s
Salmon Creek Inlet
BODEGA BAY
BODEGA
Gale
Dairy


Lorenzo Dow Gale
1828-1907

BODEGA BAY FISHERMAN'S FESTIVAL

Saturday & Sunday, May 2-3, 10 am to 5 pm, Westshore Road, Bodega Bay

Since 1973 the Bodega Bay community has hosted our annual Fisherman's Festival, a festival packed with events for people of all ages – craft booths, live music, good food, entertainment and more. A favorite attraction is the wine tasting booth featuring more than 25 Sonoma County wines and a beer booth with several local ales. Plus we have something for every palate from barbecued oysters, local fish & chips, clam chowder and a variety of food trucks. Live music and entertainers perform on the main stage all day Saturday and Sunday. Artisans and vendors from all over California and beyond offer a wide selection of arts and crafts. Tickets: https://www.bbfishfest.org/

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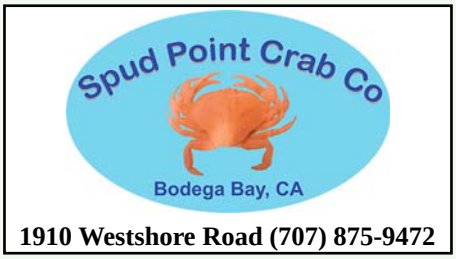

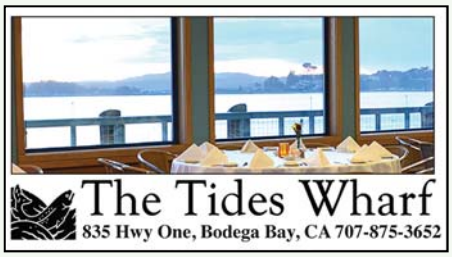

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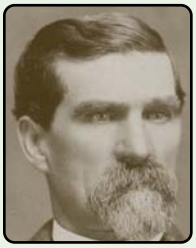
IN THIS ISSUE

Bodega Bay's Early Explorer

In June 1775, the two ships from San Blas continued their northward exploration. Juan Bodega, captained the schooner Sonora, and Bruno de Hezeta captained frigate Santiago.

Lorenzo Gale 1828-1907



Lorenzo Gale was born in Franklin Ohio. He married Eliza Wilfley and they moved west to Sonoma County and purchased property in Bodega Bay in the 1860s and operated a dairy.

WINTER EVENTS

WINEMAKER DINNER ***Friday, April 17th*** @ 6:30 pm - 9:00 pm Bay View Restaurant & Lounge (at Inn at the Tides) 800 Highway 1. Reception (no-host bar): 6:30 PM, Dinner: 7:00 PM Price: $150 per person (plus tax & gratuity) Dinner featuring Herb Lamb Loin, Cabernet Jus, Spinach Souffle, Scalloped Potatoes and wines from Grgich Hills Estate. ***Friday May 15th*** @ 6:30 pm - 9:00 pm. Dinner featuring New York Steak au Poivre, Twice Baked Potato, Savoy Spinach and wines from Balletto Vineyards. ***Friday, June 12th*** @ 6:30 pm - 9:00 pm. Dinner featuring Beef Wellington, Mushroom Pate, Puff Pastry, Cabernet Sauvignon Demi-Glace, Root Vegetables and wines from Honig Vineyard and Winery. Reservations (800) 541-7788

MUSSEL FORAGE & FEAST Sonoma County Beach TBD, Thursday, April 23, 2026 10 am to 1:00 pm. A magical mussel foraging adventure on the Sonoma Coast. You will learn how to sustainably forage, clean, and prepare our beautiful California coast mussels. A post-foraging feast of mussels on the beach provides the perfect gathering spot to learn how to care for your mussels, ask questions, and enjoy the view. Each person will take home up to 10 lb of fresh foraged mussels to share, recipes, and instructions. https://www.forkinthepath.org/schedule/mussel-foraging-2025-bm3gw-9cx4a-w9mzn

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