

## Readers' Guide

# *A Yankee in Mexican California, 1834–1836*

Richard Henry Dana Jr.  
Foreword by John Seibert Farnsworth

### Timeline

This outline of notable events will help you put *A Yankee in Mexican California* in context.

- 1815 Richard Henry Dana Jr. is born on August 1 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1825 Dana begins his studies at Cambridgeport, an elementary school for young boys overseen by writer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- 1831 In July Dana begins his studies at Harvard but is soon suspended by the administration for taking part in a violent student protest.
- 1831 Charles Robert Darwin departs on the HMS *Beagle* to explore the natural history of various coastlines across the world.
- 1833 Dana contracts measles and eventually develops ophthalmia and severe weakening of his eyesight. Hoping the change of atmosphere and fresh air provided by a sea voyage will improve this condition, he decides to enlist on a merchant brig, the *Pilgrim*.
- 1834 On August 14, the *Pilgrim* departs for Mexican California as part of a hide trading expedition.
- 1835 Dana arrives at the Santa Barbara Channel in January and writes his observations of the coastline. He visits several settlements, such as San Diego, San Pedro, and San Juan Capistrano. Over the next two years, he records his experiences and impressions of the land and native peoples.
- 1836 On September 22, Dana departs Mexican California on the merchant ship the *Alert*, and upon his return to Massachusetts he enrolls in Harvard Law School.
- 1840 Having graduated with a specialization in maritime law, Dana is admitted to the bar and will become a respected lawyer in New England.
- 1840 Based upon his detailed journal accounts of his voyage to California aboard the *Pilgrim*, Dana publishes a memoir, *Two Years before the Mast*.

- 1841 Following the popular reception of his memoir, Dana publishes *The Seaman's Friend*, which becomes known as the authority for the legal rights and duties of seamen.
- 1848 Passionately involved with the abolitionist movement, Dana helps to found the antislavery Free Soil Party.
- 1848 On January 24, gold is first discovered at Sutter's Mill, inciting the California Gold Rush. *Two Years before the Mast* serves as one of the only accounts of the coastal landscape and a guide for the thousands departing by sea for California.
- 1848 On February 2, Mexico and the United States sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexico cedes 525,000 square miles of the Southwest and West, including Upper California, to the United States.
- 1850 California becomes the 31st state on September 9.
- 1859 As the US considers the annexation of Cuba, Dana travels to Havana and publishes his observations in *To Cuba and Back*.
- 1860 Following Lincoln's inauguration, Dana is appointed United States District Attorney for Massachusetts.
- 1862–  
1865 Dana serves as United States District Attorney during the Civil War.
- 1867–  
1868 Dana serves as a member of the Massachusetts state legislature.
- 1869 After a return trip to California, Dana revises *Two Years before the Mast* to include *Twenty-Four Years After*, a work detailing the drastic changes in California in the twenty-four years between his visits.
- 1882 After several years of studying and traveling abroad, Dana contracts influenza and dies in Rome on January 6.

### Questions to Discuss

1. How do Dana's social status and educational experience affect his observations and opinions of the labor and lifestyle on the *Pilgrim*?
2. Many readers regard Dana as a master of memoir; is that the genre in which you would place *Two Years before the Mast*? Could it also be considered a piece of travel writing or a scientific work?

3. “No sooner was the importance of the country known, than the Jesuits obtained leave to establish themselves in it, to Christianize and enlighten the Indians. They established missions in various parts of the country...and collected the native about them, baptizing them into the Church, and teaching them the arts of the civilized life.” Does Dana consider the missions a better option and way of life for the native people or does he portray them as oppressive and restricting?
4. In his foreword, John Farnsworth states that some of Dana’s observations about the “Californios and Indians” seem classist and racist to our contemporary society. What evidence can you find to support this statement?
5. What observations does Dana offer that might foreshadow his passionate involvement with the abolitionist movement in his later life?
6. “...A country embracing four or five hundred miles of sea-coast, with several good harbors; with fine forests in the north; the waters filled with fish...blessed with a climate than which there can be no better in the world.” What descriptions in *A Yankee in Mexican California* hold true to the California of today? Were there specific observations which seem drastically different?
7. Several important historical events, such as the Civil War, the Gold Rush, and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, occurred between Dana’s visits to California. How might these events have changed the California that Dana observed?
8. Dana’s work provided detailed descriptions of the California coastline, bays, and ports. What elements native to California seemed to particularly fascinate him?

### Suggested Reading

Dana, Richard Henry. *Speeches in Stirring Times and Letters to a Son*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910.

Dana, Richard Henry, *Two Years before the Mast and Other Voyages*. New York: Library of America, 2005.

Dana, Richard Henry, Jr. *Two Years before the Mast and Twenty-four Years After*. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909.

Gale, Robert L. *Richard Henry Dana, Jr.* New York: Twayne, 1969.