

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

June 11, 1951

Beans for Breakfast

Breakfast in the Mexican caravan as described by Carl Meyer in his "Bound for Sacramento" printed in 1855, is worthy of repetition in the Diary today. It might be a suggestion for modern day campers and picnickers.

Meyers begins his narrative with: "Soon the pote filled with poritos, the tasty Mexican beans, cooked tender the evening before, crackles on the fire. This cooking "pote" and the "sarden" the frying pan, are the only cooking utensils in the caravan kitchen, and are never washed or cleaned.

"The 'madre' kneads corn dough in the "patea," the broad wooden platter, from which tortillas, the main food of the whole group, the fried. He weights off about half a pound of this dough in his hand, shapes it round and with admirable skill makes thin cakes, about the size of a dinner plate, by rapidly slapping the dough from one palm to the other and stretching it across his knees.

"This dough manipulation makes quite a noise, especially if helpers have come to the aid of the madre; it reminds one of the early threshing of our countrymen and would wake anyone from a sound sleep who has the least appetite.

"When each cake is sufficiently broad and thin it is placed on the "kormal," a piece of sheet iron which has been heated in one minute. Breakfast is over as soon as the last cake is baked; frijoles and tortillas are the only food of all and everyone feels strengthened for the departure after the frugal meal, and singing cheerful songs, the animals saddle and packed.

According to Meyers' description it takes much practice to put the complete Mexican saddle and harness on the horses or to tie the voluminous burden on the mules so that they can go up hill and down dale all day without shaking it off. If everything is arranged with the necessary knowledge and care, even the heat and the pack does not prevent him from proceeding on his way as if he were bound for a large meal.

The "sudaderas, "the wool seat blankets, are first placed on the backs of the bridled riding horses, then the shoulder cushions and heavy saddle are place on this. Over these are hung the "alforcas," and strapped on with two strong belly straps.

To protect the moccasined feet of the rider "tapaderas" (two round pieces of leather) are placed on the wooden stirrups which weigh from three to five pounds, and the "cola de poso" hangs around the quarters of the horse to chase away the banchuca, a poisonous fly parasite. An "aparejo," weighing 20 pounds, serves as a foundation on the pack animals on which were laid the goods packed in bales covered by stout hide and bound on by stout hide thongs.

The Meyers narrative continues with the happenings as the caravan moves out of camp. The head horse, "madrina," an old mare wearing a bell and ridden by the madre (leader), is followed by the other animals, the part of the cavalcade. If a pack should become disarranged the lasso falls and the animal's eyes covered and in a few minutes, it is repacked and back in line.

The middle of the procession consists of people of the first division and somewhat at a distance those of the third division, make up the end of the possession.

All the servants carry a "bota," filled with water, a lasso, and an equally indispensable "machete." In Spanish America in 1849 the machete was the universal weapon, a most dangerous and serviceable tool in the hand of the people. The father gave to his son for a Christmas present and it remained his companion during his whole life. It was most dangerous in the hands of the Mexicans.

An amusing incident happened in the caravan is noted by Meyer: "Two Mexicans throw away their half-smoked "cigarillos," and one thinks that they have quarreled about something of grave importance. But not so, they are trying to decide however, which is the most beautiful country, Mexico or California that is: Which of these two countries has more feed and water to offer animals."