

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Bound for Sacramento

A Mexican Caravan would not be complete without the "arrieros" (caretakers of the animals) as described by Carl Meyers in his "Bound for Sacramento" as published in German in 1855.

The arrieros, who know no sweeter life than traveling with a caravan, furnished the most entertainment. Curiosity, jolly ideas and good humor were typical of the Mexican and there was much evidence of these characteristics on such a trip as Meyers and his companion took with the caravan from San Juan to the gold fields, so they were seldom bored in the procession.

A "coleo" was held at times, to which the riders challenged each other. They would ride off a short distance, according to Meyers, when the jolliest, wildest confusion would reign while each would strive to grasp the tail of the other's horse to dismount him. This would afford opportunity to admire the horsemanship and cunning of the Mexican and there were many to admire in 1849 when the trip was made.

One of the arrieros, writes Meyers was a cheerful jolly Chilean, who was probably a sereno in his youth, who would sing a Tonadilla, a serene folk song, which he sang often while a nightwatchman; the other a husky barretero, who formerly in the cajons (the mine corridors) swung a hundred blows on the barrena with his heavy sixteen pound hammer, devoted himself to the smoking cigarillo.

It amused Meyer and his traveling companion to see these Mexicans when the heat of the day seemed to try to burn up the world as they passed over the Pacheco Pass, frequently ride along sound asleep while his animal, itself half asleep, would crawl along the edge of a precipice. As soon as the noon hour had passed no more yawning was in evidence.

During the first days of the caravan's progress when cocina, dispensa & granero (kitchen, pantry and corn bin) were well stocked, tortillas and quesadillas, dried cheese cakes, were dispensed at noon, wrote Meyers, and the bota was emptied of all its content which then consisted of pulque, the fermented juice of maguey fruit, instead of water.

It is interesting to note in this narrative written by a German after his first visit to California, his keen observance of the beauty of nature in this new country. He wrote: "The time came soon to think seriously of the goal for the day's journey when the flocks of bandurias, plover, begin their evening flight toward the mountains, when the taparcamino (roadrunners) fluttering on their way block the path of the caravan, when the guza, the prairie dog, sounds his evening wolf howl to the echoes at his home, and the dottrel and the whip-poor-will are hushed by the mocking bird.

"The Mexican members of the caravan believe it is a 'rara avis in terra' if no camping site is visible at this time. He finally arrives at an arroyo, a small brook, near a green patera. When the caravan in the far west of America are fortunate enough to find such places, suitably located at some distance apart, they dare not proceed farther without stopping if they have the well being of their animals at heart."

The leader of caravan rides on ahead, it is noted, and marks the spot of the campo. The madrina (lead horse) arrives and the whole caravan arranges itself about her. The aparejos are removed and set up in a semi-circle, and behind these all the goods and implements are neatly placed so that everything will be on hand when it is time to commence saddling.

The members of the caravan, wrapped in their ponchos, lie on the ground, scattered about or in groups. One consumes a mush made of cornmeal and water, pinole, the other prepares a frangollo punch or a corn concoction, atole, which he guzzles, burning hot, by means of the bomba, the silver tea spout, and a third who has neither poncho nor punch, a poor but jolly arriero, who from the beginning of the journey has depended upon the generosity of his countrymen, is able by means of his jokes and pranks to get hold of the bota or drinking Bessel and empty it to the last drop, expressing his gratitude with "mil gracias".

"On the meadow, close to the camp, the bell of the madrina (lead horse) tinkle constantly, a sign that the animals of the caravan cannot even rest at night but must use this time to satisfy their hunger. Everything else is still and solemnly quiet. All for one and one for all is the watchword of night in a Mexican caravan" Meyer recorded in his "Nach del Sacramento".