

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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At a Snail's Pace

"Nach dem Sacramento," originally published in 1855, in Aarau, a small town in Switzerland, was written by Carl Meyer, himself a German Swiss. The translation by Ruth Frey Axe is the only known English presentation of the complete narrative.

The account gives detailed word pictures of the life in Panama, a harrowing ocean voyage, and then California during the period from 1849 to 1852. Meyer landed at Monterey, stayed with the Hartnell family, and then traveled by horseback in the gold country.

The translation was printed in 1938 by the Saunders Studio Press in Claremont as a limited edition. Ruth Frey Axe, the translator, is a friend of Mrs. Mary Greene, the curator at the Custom House, and Mrs. Greene has kindly loaned her edition to the Diary.

After a lengthy visit with W.E.P. Hartnell and his family at the Alisal Rancho near Salinas, Meyer and his companion proceeded on to San Juan where they joined a Mexican caravan which had arrived the day before after a four months' trip from Mexico.

The Mexicans were very happy to travel with them under the American flag. Meyer writes that none of the caravan understood English but as they represented the position of American owners of this prairie fleet, they were accorded immediate respect.

The events recorded all occurred in 1849 but it is interesting to read that Meyer thought the traveling was in a modern world. To quote from his notations: "It is pleasant to travel in the new style, to be hurled by force of steam over a smooth road from one end of the world to another with such rapidity ... but there is something pleasant about creeping along at a snail's pace on the back of a sure-footed mule while mile after mile is covered and restful pauses are made from time to time .. One learns much there and above all one learns to be patient while traveling; a virtue almost beyond the conception of the modern world ... I, for my part, praise the Mexican caravan."

In the caravan which started out on a Sunday morning from San Juan were 150 mules, donkeys and horses, and 100 Mexicans and Chileans. It included the entire population of an exhausted Mexican silver mine which

was now on its way to seek fortune in the California gold fields.

According to the Mexican custom of caravans the cavalcade was separated into three divisions, according to Meyer's writing. The first was the owner and majordomos, the fellow travelers, friends and strangers; the second, the caraderos, who looked after the goods and their assistants; the third, the arrieros and savannaros, who took care of the cattle. The horses were all Mexican, with two-thirds of the animals consisting of mules and burros, the native donkeys.

A mule, in those days and probably now, could carry 16, a donkey eight arobas (25 pounds); these animals could be served straw and wood if the feed supply is low and they are only thirsty when water is at hand, Mr. Meyer noted in his narrative. They are rarely lazy and that was why they were indispensable as the members of the Mexican caravan, accustomed as they are to great hardships and long fasts.

At daybreak after they have drunk their fill the animals were led to the camp by their savannaros. All have risen and the madre, usually a small boy, has filled the botos (leather flasks) with water at the brook and brought them for breakfast.

It has been said that the description of the Mexican caravan as written by Carl Meyer is the best ever to be recorded so we are happy to quote from his writings, as to what the food in the large party consisted of and how it was prepared. These facts we will relate in another story.