

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 27, 1951

As Scarce As Alligators

It was April Fool's Day in 1871 when a "road agent" as stage robbers were known in those days, stopped the Mountain Stage in broad daylight, about one-half mile from the Pachin post office in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Because of the day and the tricks that are still played on unsuspecting persons on this occasion few people believed the story when it was reported on the streets of Santa Cruz

Seven passengers were on board the stage, including Mrs. J.M. Smith, wife of Captain Smith of Santa Cruz, with her young son, who occupied a seat beside the driver. Mrs. Smith was the mother of Mrs. J.C. Falkenburg who lives in Del Rey Woods in Monterey, and the grandmother of Stanley Falkenburg, and Fay Falkenburg both of Monterey.

The fact that the stage from San Jose had never been stopped before and that road agents were as scarce as alligators, contributed in throwing doubt upon the story, according to a newspaper article which appeared in the Santa Cruz paper and which has been saved since those early days by Mrs. Smith and her descendants.

A solitary man stopped the stage and robbed the passengers. The scene of the robbery was in Santa Clara County about a mile from the summit, and where the old road used to lead across the mountains. It was also known as the spot where the passengers formerly alighted to walk over the hill.

The road at that point ran through a region covered with brush and a few big trees stood by the road. For this reason it was especially favorable to road agents, according to the reporter's accounts, who also wrote that "The stage on Wednesday consisted of an 11-passenger mud-wagon. J.P. Smith was the driver and holding the reins over four horses."

The second woman passenger for the journey to Santa Cruz was Mrs. Canney of San Jose, who sat inside the stage. She was a venerable Quakeress who had been in Santa Cruz a short time before and addressed a meeting of the Society of Friends in the Unity and Methodist churches.

At the time of the robbery the stage was traveling at a lively rate, according to the report, when suddenly a man leaped out from behind the brush and raised a

double-barreled shotgun at the driver's head, ordering him to stop. Smith reined up his horses, and told the man to keep away from his leaders.

According to the witnesses the robber was masked. His face concealed behind a piece of blue woolen flannel, with holes for eyes and mouth. A black slouch hat was on his head. A long light brownish beard revealed its presence under the crude mask. He wore dark pantaloons, was of medium height and square build, and spoke with an American accent. A new dirk knife was suspended from his wrist.

As soon as the stage had stopped the robber demanded in nervous tones, that the Wells Fargo & Co. treasure box be passed down to him. The driver informed him that he had no express box with him. The road agent said he knew better, according to the accounts reported to the Santa Cruz newspaper later, and told Mr. Smith to pass down the box to him at once.

The driver protested and Mrs. J.M. Smith, the grandmother of the Falkenburg brothers of Monterey, also told the robber that there was no box on board. Then the driver threw out two of Uncle Sam's mail bags; one for Pachin and one for Santa Cruz. The robber kicked the bags aside, and said that he guessed that there was nothing in them that he wanted. He had come for money and if he could not get any out of the box, the passengers would have to shell out their loose change.

While this was going on, Mrs. Smith's little boy screamed with fright. The actions of the masked robber had scared the little fellow, according to later reports to Mrs. Smith's family. Meanwhile the passengers commenced to fling their spare coins out of the window of the wagon, pending which proceedings the masked bandit stood off at some distance, menacingly pointing his shotgun at his victims.