

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 11, 1951

A Lagoon Where the Women Washed Their Clothes

Residents and visitors who are observing, must have many times wondered about the deep ravine on Hartnell street between the Stokes adobe and the Monterey Hospital and back of the Poor Scholar Book Shop. They must have been curious about its beginning and its ending and just why it is there.

We have been able to solve part of the mystery for we found two items in the early issues of the Monterey Sentinel when we were privileged to peruse bound copies of Vol. 1, the issues published from June 1855 to June 1856, now the property of the Santa Cruz Sentinel moved to Santa Cruz in the latter year when free transportation by schooner was offered to the publisher by a progressive citizen of the neighboring city across the bay.

On January 5, 1856, under the heading "Singular Example of Erosion by Water." The article goes on to state that some 15 years before, as the editors had been informed by the old settlers of the town, a small field was being plowed on a flat in the hills some six hundred feet up the present gulch from the Hartnell House (now Monterey Hospital), which is or was, about 1,000 yards from the flat before the sea beach. This chasm had worn deeper and deeper in the years and at the time the article was written, it measured some 1,600 yards in length. Sometimes in rainy season it measured 25 feet in depth, and 12 feet in breadth and was a rapid torrent.

In the following week's issue of the Sentinel there appeared this item: "Aqueous Erosion of the Earth" and quoted an old settler with the following version of the cause of the ravine, which we now also see at the north of the Walter Colton school and at the south of the Cooper House. "Noticing the remarks in your last issue on the formation of the big gulch of the town, I will add that the first notice of the soil being worn away by the water, was in the winter of 1823; a season in which fell immense quantities of rain. In 1824 and for several years after, the gulch kept on wearing away until it has finally attained its present dimensions. In 1824 a man could easily jump over it – it now has four small bridges over its bed. It empties into the plain by the Washington Hotel (now the Herald building site) where was formerly

a lagoon where the women washed their clothes. It runs entirely dry now immediately after the rainy season."

Evidently according to this item in the Sentinel in January 1856, the plain at Washington and Abrego streets in 1823 was the first Washer-woman's Bay rather than the later site at Aguajito Road and Fremont streets.

San Benito County might have had another name. It might have been known in 1851 as Cabrillo County if the publisher of the Sentinel had had his way on February 9, 1856 for in his editorial column of that date he wrote "Circulation of a petition to form a new county – Gilroy, San Juan and the Valley of the Pajaro – county seat to be San Juan. Several names for the new county, the territory to be taken from Monterey County, have been suggested such as San Juan, Aromas, Las Animas, Pajaro, Aurora and Cabrillo. The most sensible seems to us to be the last as Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was not only the discoverer of California, but actually the first discoverer of Santa Cruz County, and the first who mentioned the country lying along the Pajaro Valley. This in the month of November, 1542."

San Benito County was created by a legislative enactment from the northern and eastern portions of Monterey County on February 12, 1874. The significance of other names that might have been applied to the county is interesting. Aromas, now a community in Monterey County, is derived from the name of a land grant Aromitas & Agua Caliente (little odors and warm water). The aromas or aromitas referred apparently to the odors of sulphur water. Pajaro (bird) was named by Portola's soldiers in October 1769. They had found there an enormous bird which the Indians had stuffed with straw.

The Salinas must have been much more of a river in 1856 than it is in 1951, for there appeared this notice in one of the issues of that year. "The undersigned intends to apply to the Board of Supervisors of the County of Monterey, at its next session, for a license to establish a ferry across the Salinas River near its mouth, at a place where he resides, on the Island near Whitlock's. Signed, John L. Coffman.