

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 1, 1952

### **Lynching Recorded In Old Diary**

J. Warren Matthews was probably one of the first historians of San Benito County, for 1872 he kept a very full and interesting diary of the happenings from day to day in the Bitterwater Valley, where he and his family were among the very first settlers. One of the most entertaining of his many exciting experiences was the one in which he gave a vivid account of a stage robbery which we will continue today.

In the entry dated Sunday, April 21, 1872, Mr. Matthews continues: "On returning home we learned that Joe Castro had been arrested and Constable McCool had him in charge."

Two days later he wrote; "Just after daylight we learned that Joe Castro had been taken from Lyman, Moodie and Billings, who were guarding him, by a mob of marked men. Just as Shield and I were about to commence work this morning Lyman came and summoned us both on a coroner's jury, he having found Joe's body hanging from a large willow tree about 300 yards from the Breen house where they were guarding him at the time he was taken from them by the mob.

"Upon repairing to the spot we found the body still dangling in the air, the rope used in hanging him was a very small one, about half inch. I think, and well worn. I would not have believed it would have held up the weight of man as heavy as Castro. Joe's face, eyes and mouth looked natural like and not distorted as I would have supposed. His wrists were tired in front of him and his feet were very close to the ground. We could move his head from side to side very easily and as his other joints were very stiff, we concluded that his neck had been broken."

Matthews goes on in his diary to describe the inquest and the description of the taking of Castro from caretakers at the home of Breen.

"Esquire Brown acted as coroner. Moody an Billings testified that they were sitting by the fire talking when about half after twelve o'clock, all of a sudden the front door was pushed open (they had a chair sitting in front of it.) and several men, armed, came in with guns and pistols presented, and one of them ordered them to hold up their hands. On their complying with this command, one of the mob stepped forward and took

their arms. Then Lyman was ordered to "tye", blindfold and lead the prisoner to the door. As the men were leaving the door one of them ordered Billings and Lyman to stay in the house one hour and half if they valued their lives."

Matthews wrote that several other witnesses were examined, namely; Upton, Matthis, Doc Garner, Parks, Cornwell, Mantes, Merchant and McCool.

Later on in the diary Matthews writes; "I neglected to state that Billings and Moody stated that the men who took Joe away from them were completely masked, their faces being completely covered with a kind of gown made of barley sacks and that nearly all the talking was done by one person whose voice they could not recognize."

Matthews ends his diary story of one of California's early state robberies with this statement; "Our verdict was that Castro was dead and hanging by the neck upon examination we found that his neck was broken."

The place where this robbery was committed was where the bridge crosses the San Benito Creek a few miles above Palcines. This place was known as the Robbers' Roost. Later it was taken over by a Frenchman by the name of Divigio, and then called Divigio's crossing.