

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Dragoons' Buttons

Now is the time to see wild flowers in southern Monterey and Kern county. The hills and fields from Paso Robles over to Bakersfield are a mass of brilliant coloring – lupine, poppies, daisies and other flowers noted to that part of the country. Beauty surrounds the motorist, everywhere is a lush growth, the grass is green and tall, the cattle look well fed and happy and the fruit trees are in blossom – even the desert country is alive with growth. So pack up your troubles and take a ride!

After leaving Bakersfield on our way south we stopped to visit Fort Tejon, one of California's outstanding historical landmark sites, known in the official state register as Number 129. Fort Tejon is without question the foremost remaining evidence in Central California of the early American occupation period.

The fort was established by the United States Army on Aug. 10, 1854, and was abandoned ten years later on Sept. 11, 1864. It is located in Grapevine Canyon, Kern County, at the edge of Highway 99, 36 miles south of Bakersfield. It is therefore very easy for the motorist to visit. The present highway runs through the original area of the fort, the blacksmith, guard house and other important buildings being on the opposite side of the road from the fort as it is being restored by the California State Parks Commission.

Tejon is a Spanish and Indian word meaning badger and was the name given to the original grant on which the fort stands by its first owner, Ignacio del Valle.

Gen. Edward Fitzgerald Beale in his capacity of Commissioner of Indian Affairs in California and Nevada had recommended the establishment of a military post about 15 miles southwest of the Sebastian Indian Reservation for the purpose of protecting the friendly Indians in the southern San Joaquin Valley. This particular location in the Canada de las Uvas or Grapevine Canyon had been recommended to the Indian Commissioner Beale by Lts. Williamson and Parke who had in 1853 surveyed all the passes out of the San Joaquin Valley in their search for a suitable railroad route through the mountains. The area was also considered advantageous since it strategically controlled an important pass through which stolen

horses and cattle from the San Joaquin were driven to markets in the southwest.

The construction of a post on the fort's present site was authorized by a special order of U.S. Army's Department of the Pacific dated June 24, 1854. Six days later, so we were told, a detachment of Company A, 1st U.S. Dragoons, were ordered to this location under the command of First Lt. Thomas F. Castor. A monument to his memory was placed within the former boundaries of the reservation by members of Castor's family and can be seen from the present reservation.

The Dragoons, we were told by the ranger in charge – and I have since verified this information – arrived in two detachments. Lt Castor and 16 men arrived on Aug. 10 and another group five days later under command of Lt. Latimer. Both groups shortly thereafter came under the command of Beale and Fort Tejon then became regimental headquarters for the First Dragoons whose activities carried them over much of Western America.

In the files at the fort, there are many buttons from the Dragoon's uniforms and several old pieces of money which have been found on the ground or during excavation work among the buildings. We were also shown several hand blown bottles and other artifacts which have been of great help to the rangers as they reconstruct the several buildings of the old and historical fort.

Tomorrow we will relate more information concerning the way in which the state is restoring the monument and a bit more of its historical background.