

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 3, 1952

Camels on Alvarado Street

In 1857 a group of twenty-eight camels was marched from San Antonio, Texas, to Fort Tejon, California. Early in that year the U. S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, directed that camels be imported into the country. The army planned to use them in transporting supplies to the isolated posts in the arid southwest, and for patrol use in controlling hostile Indians.

The wagon road survey party to which the camels were attached was under the direction of Edward Fitzgerald Beale, who later became the owner of the vast Tejon Ranch. The splendid performance of the camels during this five months trek moved Beale to recommend to the War Department that further camels be purchased. However, various factors tended to discredit widespread use of camels in America.

With the outbreak of the Civil War and the subsequent construction of the transcontinental railroads, the camel experiment was discontinued by the army. Camels in varying numbers were stationed at Fort Tejon from November, 1857, until their removal in June, 1861. Some were taken to Los Angeles and others to San Francisco where they were sold. The ones traveling north are said to have made the trek down to Alvarado street in Monterey, much to the interest and excitement of the residents.

In 1949 an amicable association was established between the State Division of Beaches and Parks and the Kern County Historical Society through the latter's Fort Tejon Restoration committee, much as the relationship between the Monterey History and Art Association and the Park Commission in Monterey.

This advisory committee of historically minded people is deeply interested and concerned that the Fort be restored in an authentic fashion to its probable appearance as an active army post of nearly a century ago. Numerous early day post artifacts have been unearthed by the workers and will be assembled by the staff for display in a small museum on the grounds.

Fort Tejon was the chief military, social and political center between Millerton and Los Angeles. At the height of its activity there were over twenty buildings standing at the post, and during 1858 a Butterfield

Overland Mail station was established here on the line which extended from St. Louis to San Francisco.

There is a small community in the Grapevine Canyon known as Lebec, supposedly named for Peter le Beck, although the spelling is different. Standing in the northwest of the parade grounds of the old fort, the Peter le Beck tree commemorates Fort Tejon's most intriguing mystery. First mention of this tree occurs in R. S. Williamson's railroad route exploration report of 1853. He wrote that one of the oaks in Grapevine Canyon on the future site of the Fort had an inscription cut deeply into the wood. It read: "Peter le Beck," killed by a bear, Oct. 17, 1837."

Several interesting conjectures have been advanced as to the identity of the slain man whose body was exhumed and reburied in 1890 at the foot of this tree. It has been suggested that he was a French fur trapper in the employ of the Hudson Bay Company. Another fanciful tale has connected him with Napoleon's armed forces. However, despite considerable research, none has definitely established just who Peter le Beck was. At one time large pieces of the bark of the tree were carefully removed and sure enough the carving of his name and the date, with the inscription were still there and the wording could be read in reverse on the bark. This bark is now a historical item in the Kern County library at Bakersfield.