Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California Carts

John Bidwell the pioneer of 1841, wrote for The Century Magazine in 1890, telling of the social manners of the gentlemen of California at the time of gold rush and before. He declared that the kindness and hospitality of the native Californians had not been overstated. Up to the time the Mexican regime ceased in California they had a custom, he said, of never charging for entertainment, food, use of horses, etc.

Guests were supposed, even invited to visit a friend, to bring their blankets with them, and one would have been careless to travel without taking a knife with him to cut his meat. When the guest had eaten the invariable custom was to rise, deliver to the women or hostess the place on which the meal had been eaten—meat and beans generally—for that was about all to be had, and say "Muchas gracias, Senora" ("Many thanks, madam"); and the hostess as invariably replied, "Buen provecho" (May it do you much good").

In those days the missions of California invariably had gardens with grapes, olives, figs, pomegranates, pears, and apples, but the ranches scarcely ever had any fruit. Bidwell writes: "With the exception of tuna, or prickly pear, these were the only cultivated fruits I can recall to mind in California, except for oranges, lemons and limes, in a few places." The "tuna" was an Indian fig.

When the visitor wanted a horse to ride, he would take it to the next ranch—which might be 20, 30, or even 50 miles—and turn it out there, and some time or other in reclaiming his stock the owner would get it back. In this way the Californian would travel from one end of California to the other.

The ranch life was not confined to the country; it also prevailed in the pueblos. "There was not a hotel in San Francisco, Monterey, or anywhere in California till 1846, when the Americans took the country. The priests at the missions were glad to entertain the strangers without charge. They would give you a room in which to sleep, and perhaps a bedstead with a hide stretched across it, and over that you would spread your blankets," continued Bidwell.

We learn from Bidwell that at that time there was no vehicle except the crude California cart. These were made by felling an oak tree and hewing it down till it made a solid wheel nearly a foot thick on the rim and a little larger where the axle went through. The hold for the axle would be eight or nine inches in diameter, but a few years' use would always increase it to a foot.

The carts were always drawn by oxen, the yoke being lashed with rawhide to the horns. To lubricate the axles they used soap, carrying along for the purpose a big pail of thick soapsuds which was put in the box or hole; but even then one could generally tell when a California cart was coming at least a half mile away by the squeaking noise.

Bidwell wrote that he had often seen the families of the wealthiest people go long distances at rate of 30 miles or more a day, visiting in one those clumsy two-wheeled vehicles.

These carts had a frame work made of round sticks, and a bullock hide was put in for a floor or bottom. Sometimes the wealthier would have a little calico for curtains and cover. There was no such thing as a spoked wheel in use then. Somebody from Boston sent a wagon as a present to the priest in charge of the Mission at San Jose, but as soon as summer came the woodwork shrunk, the tires came off, and it fell to pieces. There was no one to set tires in California.

When Governor Milcheltorena was sent from Mexico to California he brought with him an ambulance, not much better than a spring wagon, such as a marketman would now use with one horse. It had shafts, but at that time in California there were no horses broken to work in them, not was there such a thing known as a harness; so the governor had two mounted vaqueros to pull it, their reatas being fastened to the shafts and to the pommels of their saddles.