

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

November 2, 1953

En Route to Mexico

We might suggest that the title of this column be changed to Mexican Diary for we are on our way to Mexico City, a long awaited dream coming true. We have thoroughly enjoyed receiving all the advice from many friends on the Peninsula, in Tucson and now in El Paso, Texas, on where to stay, what to eat, how to travel and what to take to read and wear – we should be an expert travel bureau agent when we re-enter the United States – so much have we tried to absorb prior to “foreign travel.”

We left Salinas in the rain on Sunday morning but rode into sunshine and warm weather near King City. Got into the golden brown hills and real heat as we crossed from Paso Robles to Bakersfield and on to Riverside. Everywhere we were reminded that rain would be a heaven-sent blessing – the water levels are low and the fire hazards great.

Although we have visited the date farm country many times it is always interesting to study the methods used on the palms. The operation for production involves climbing up to the blossoms, or later the dates, each time such operations are performed. After the pollen has been distributed and some thinning has been performed, by cutting off a portion of the female bloom, the dates begin to develop. Then more thinning, sometimes the third thinning, is done to produce larger dates and to aerate the bunches. As they become heavier, each bunch is tied down to a lower frond for support, holding it clear of the upper branches, to prevent injury to the dates and facilitate further operations. A certain amount of dusting is done to control pests.

When we were in the date country near Indio, the picking was in operation on many of the palms. About the first of August, ventilated paper had been placed over and around each blossom for further protection, principally against birds and rain. Bunches are spread at this time to increase air circulation during and after rains or humid weather, we were told.

The harvesting starts about September 1 and continues until Christmas or later. The American method is to hand pick each date at just the right ripening stage to get highest over-all quality. This means it takes about

eight pickings over a period of weeks to complete each palm, we were informed at Valerie Jean's at Thermal in California.

The dates are then fumigated, cleaned and graded by hand, according to federal standards, under the most sanitary conditions, then stored at proper refrigerator temperature to maintain natural moisture, purity and freedom from contamination over extended storage periods. The dates are now ready for actually packing, Next time we enjoy eating a date we will think of all the time and work that has been taken to condition it for the market.

One of the most attractive date shops we visited showed the result of the ingenuity of the owner. The small and attractive buildings had rafters made of redwood poles which had been used by the Western Union Telegraph Company. They had carried the wires paralleling the Southern Pacific rails through the Coachella Valley Desert to Yuma, Arizona when it was first constructed in 1877. The shop pillars and beams were bridge timbers supporting the railroad over the desert washes two generations ago. For thirty years they served that purpose.

In 1905, the overflowing Colorado River, through an irrigation break below Yuma, began filling the Salton Sea. The rising waters covered the tracks and telegraph line. These same poles, bridge timbers and railroad ties, removed at that time, lay on the desert for another 30 years, until they finally contributed their age-old and weathered beauty in the building of this date shop of Russ Nicoll.