

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Days of the Overland Mail

During our attendance at the California History Foundation meeting in Columbia recently, an event sponsored by the College of the Pacific, we received so much thrilling information concerning the various historic societies throughout the state, the current publications on California history and just plain talk in which all historians are tremendously interested. They may take some of it "with a grain of salt" but they all are probably sufficiently intrigued to return to their offices or libraries and make further study on the subject. That has been the case with this columnist.

One of the interesting items brought up at the meeting in Columbia was the "Overland Mail Centennial." The possible celebration of this important event was brought to the attention of the 100 or more persons in attendance at the Foundation meeting, by Ben F. Dixon, curator of the San Diego Historical Society. The first transcontinental postal service was the San Antonio and San Diego Mail line, known casually and colloquially as the "Birch" or "Jackass" Mail, he related. Since returning to the Peninsula we have obtained a number of books on the subject of California's first overland mail service and combining it all, we have found that we can truthfully report the Butterfield Overland Mail was not the first. Its precursor was breaking the trail through the sands of the Great American Desert more than a year ahead of Butterfield, according to recorded history.

The first transcontinental postal service was the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line, known casually by the names as we reported above. Butterfield started operating September 16, 1858. Birch's contract was effective July 1, 1857, for a four year period, and his first mail for the Pacific coast left San Antonio eight days later, on July 9th. He pioneered for later operators the great desert mail route of the Southwest.

This mail route led from San Antonio to El Paso, via Forts Clark, Lancaster, and Davis: from El Paso via Mesilla, Tucson, the Pima village of the Gila Valleys; and Fort Yuma on the Colorado to San Diego. With the exception of a few miles in the Rio Grande, Mesilla and Gila Valleys, every step of this 1,500 mile route was through barren burning desert.

The first mails, according to Mr. Dixon's research, were carried in any kind of desert conveyance the agents could round up for the job – Army freight wagons, ambulances, Concord stages, horseback and mule pack. The contractor was James E. Birch, concerning whom Banning wrote in 1930, "Not as many as two consecutive pages in history or biography have heretofore been devoted to his memory."

Birch's general superintendent was Isaiah C. Woods, an old associate in the staging business. His field agents were: at San Antonio, Geo. H. Goddings, and M.D. Bramhall; at Fort Clark, T.S. Rogers; at El Paso, Edward Hall; at San Diego, R.E. Doyle; at San Francisco, H. Van Vankenburg.

The first mail, according to Dixon, was carried out of San Antonio by Conductor James E. Mason, a pioneer of Mason Valley, San Diego County, California. He was overtaken enroute by Capt. Henry Skillman, who left with the second mail on the 24th. While Skillman returned to El Paso, Mason continued with both mails to San Diego left San Antonio August 9th. On the same date, R.W. Laine left San Diego for San Antonio, with the first east-bound mails.

Our San Diego historian goes on to write: "Mason arrived at San Diego, August 30, 1857 – to the tune of 100 anvils and much other wild and boisterous rejoicing. Due to the unavoidable delays of pioneering, the time consumed in transit for the first dispatch was 53 days. But the second, which Captain Skillman sped through the desert part of the way in a light ambulance, was made in 34 days of actual travel time. The schedules were improved with each consignment until the fifth mail from Texas to California arrived at San Diego in the unheard of record time of 26 days and 12 hours.

(To be continued)