

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Markers for Stage Stations**

California's regional committee for the 1957-1958 Overland Mail Centennial Celebrations, of which Ben F. Dixon, curator of the San Diego Junipero Serra Museum, is the chairman, held its first meeting on the Campus of Occidental College at Eagle Rock on July 20, 1953.

Set up by the American Association for State and Local History to activate California's program for centennial observances of the arrival of the Overland Mail Service on the Pacific Coast in the 1850s, the committee consists of Dr. George P. Hammond, director of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley; Dr. W. Turrentine Jackson, Department of History, University of California at Davis; Dr. Glenn S. Dumke, dean of the faculty at Occidental College; and the chairman already mentioned. A national and ten regional committees were organized as a result of Dixon's representations before the national convention of the association at Houston, Texas, last October. The San Diego Society delegated him to present the project for a national centennial observation of the almost forgotten work of Jim Birch and John Butterfield in pioneering the extension of mail service to the west coast in 1857 and 1858. Dixon circulated a pamphlet "Overland Mail Centennials" among the delegates, and presented a resolution in favor of national sponsorship by the association. The project was favorably received. Dr. H. Bailey Carroll, editor of the Southwestern Historical Quarterly, at Austin, Texas, was made chairman of the national committee.

The first meeting, according to Ben F. Dixon of San Diego, was attended by Roscoe P. and Margaret B. Conkling, authors of a three-volume historical study, "The Butterfield Overland Stage, 1857-1869," who were made advisory members. A statewide marker project was planned to identify and mark sites of the old stage stations. Dr. Arthur Lockwood of San Diego County, curator for many years of the Los Angeles County Museum, will head this activity.

On Sunday, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, the opening gun in the marker campaign will be held between the Werner Ranch and Temecula at Oak Grove, when the Conklings will dedicate a highway marker for the old Butterfield Oak Grove Station. The bronze marker and pedestal have been provided by the San Diego County Board of

Supervisors. A historical trek and picnic will be organized by the San Diego Historical Society.

Oak Grove is also the site of Civil War Camp Wright, where the Showalter Filibusters were captured by California cavalry volunteers. A marker for Camp Wright will also be dedicated at Oak Grove on August 23.

The architect of this great experiment in desert transportation of mail was a young man from Providence, Rhode Island, names James E. Birch. He was born in 1827, and grew up in New England with a whip in his hand, according to the description written of him by Dixon. An overland emigrant to California in 1849, he failed to rush madly into the gold field as soon as he arrived. Instead, he rushed into the transportation business. Inspired by his Yankee ingenuity and pioneering leadership, operators soon had stage lines leading everywhere in the Mother Lode country. On January 1, 1854, Birch became president of the monopolistic Stage Company, which operated stages in nearly every section of the State of California.

Later Birch went to Washington and stormed the halls of Congress in the interests of his dream of a transcontinental stage and mail line. The dream came true on August 18, 1856, when Congress authorized the Pacific mail contract in connection with the postal bill. But when it was let, in 1857, it went to John Butterfield and his group of associates.

The postal bill however was a different thing and permitted the postmaster general to open immediately a transcontinental mail line between San Antonio and San Diego. Birch got the contract on June 22, 1857, for four years. It provided two mails each way per month with an annual consideration of \$149,800.