

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 19, 1953

### **Centennial of the 'Jackass Mail'**

After young James E. Birch received the contract for a transcontinental mail line between San Antonio and San Diego, he immediately appointed Isaiah C. Woods his general superintendent and dispatched him to Texas to start the wheels rolling.

Woods left New York June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1857, just two days after the contract was let. He had \$20,000 in his pocket and authority to act for Birch, while the latter was traveling by steamer for San Francisco. The two planned to meet again in September at San Diego.

Woods arrived at New Orleans July 3, and at Indianola July 7, barely missing the stage connection for San Antonio. This difficulty made him too late to dispatch the first mail personally, but he was on hand to make all arrangements for the second. It left San Antonio at 6 a.m. July 24, according to Woods' report. The centennial celebration of these events are to be celebrated four years hence if the plans of California's Regional Committee for Overland Mail Centennial Celebrations are carried out.

The mail service outfit which left San Antonio on July 24<sup>th</sup>, was outfitted as follows:

"One coach and harness

"Six men, well armed with rifles and a Colt's pistol for each.

"Four saddles and accoutrements

"Ropes, hopples, shoeing tools, shoes and nails.

"Cooking utensils, and numerous minor articles

"Provisions for 30 days, calculated to last to the Pimas villages and back to El Paso.

"Thirty-six mules; of these 27 had been sent forward on the road as relays.

"Also 600 dollars in cash to purchase supplies on the route."

Woods himself accompanied the third mail, leaving San Antonio August 9, and arriving in San Diego at 10:00 p.m., September 8; according to the records and the research accomplished by Ben F. Dixon, the curator of the San Diego Historical Society, who is also a member of the Centennial Committee. When he arrived at San

Diego he was disappointed to find that Birch had departed for the east on August 20. Very soon, he learned, however, that Birch met his death on September 12, going down in a violent storm off Cape Hatteras, with 400 fellow passengers and \$2,000,000 in gold.

This is the story of James E. Birch and the pioneering of the famous "Jackass Mail" – the first Pacific Overland Mail – in 1857. The centennial of this great project of western and southwestern history will be with us before we know it. Its historical significance in the fields of communication, transport, post office and mails, and desert trails in one of high interest to the entire nation. The celebration is planned as a national affair, according to the literature already being circulated by the committee in California.