

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 21, 1953

California's First Newspaper

We have missed by a few days the anniversary of the publication of California's first newspaper.

On Saturday, Aug. 15, 1846, the Monterey Californian published its volume one, number one. The Californian was owned by the Rev. Walter Colton and Dr. Robert Baylor Semple. It was a four-page paper published in two languages – English and Spanish.

Page one of the first edition carried this note: "This is the first paper ever published in California."

On Page two, the Californian informed its Spanish speaking readers: "El California se publicara cada sabado por la manana. Este es el primer periodico que ha salido a luz en California."

Translated, the notice announced that the Californian was a weekly, published each Saturday morning and was the first to emerge into the light of day in California.

Journalistic and transportation progress were commensurated simultaneously Aug. 15, 1946, as reproduction copies of California's first newspaper were flown to Los Angeles, scant hours after they emerged from the same type hand press which might have printed the original issue at Monterey 100 years before. The trip was made in 90 minutes, whereas in 1846 it took at least nine days to cover the same distance on horseback and carry the mail. The meeting in Monterey in 1946 was sponsored by the California Newspaper Publishers Association.

Looking back through Walter Colton's "Three Years in California" published by A.S. Barnes & Co., No. 51 John St., Cincinnati: H.W. Derby & Co., 1850; we find this diary notation on Aug. 15, 1846:

"Today the first newspaper ever published in California made its appearance. The honor, if such it be, of writing its Prospectus, fell to me. It is to be issued on every Saturday, and published by Semple and Colton. Little did I think when relinquishing the editorship of the North American in Philadelphia, that my next feat in this line would be off here in California. My partner is an emigrant from Kentucky, who stands six feet wight in his stockings. He is in buckskin dress, a foxskin cap; is

true with the rifle, ready with his pen, and quick at the type-case.

"He created the materials of our office out of the chaos of a small concern, which had been used by a Roman Catholic monk in printing a few sectarian tracts. The press was old enough to be preserved as a curiosity; mice had burrowed in the balls; there were no rules, no leads, and the types were rusty and all in pi. It was only by scouring that the letters could be made to show their faces. A sheet or two of tin was procured and, with a jack-knife, cut into rules and leads. Luckily we found, with the press, the greater part of a keg of ink; and now came the main scratch for paper.

"None could be found, except what is used to envelop the tobacco of the cigar smoked here by the natives. A coaster had a small supply on board, which we procured. It is in sheets a little larger than the common-sized foolscap. And this is the size of our first paper, which we have christened the Californian.

"Though small in dimensions, our first number is as full of news as a black-walnut is of meat. We have received by couriers, during the week, intelligence from all the important military posts through the territory. Very little of this has transpired; it reaches the public the first time through our sheet. We have, also, the declaration of war between the United States and Mexico, with an abstract of the debate in the Senate. A crowd was waiting when the first sheet was thrown from the press. It provided quite a sensation. Never was a bank run upon harder; not, however, by people with paper to get specie, but exactly the reverse. One-half of the paper is in English, the other in Spanish. The subscription for a year is \$5; the price for a single sheet is 12 ½ cents; and is considered cheap at that."

Walter Colton was first American Alcalde of Monterey, the builder of Colton Hall, the site of California's first Constitutional Convention, and through the years a building which has been used as a school, courthouse and a place of worship. California, however, remembers Walter Colton best for preserving a fascinating transitional era in its history. His journal loses none of its pungency with the passing of more than a hundred years. Colton Hall belongs to all of California historically, not to Monterey alone. May it be preserved for all eternity!

(To Be Continued)