

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Early California Floods

The early 1850s in California were exciting, adventurous ones for the pioneer men and women who came West to establish their homes and seek a livelihood.

In our last issue of the Diary we told the story of Henry Chambers and his fight with a California grizzly bear. Today we will relate some of the stories Chambers told to his son, J.M. Chambers, during the years the family lived near Kings River, before moving finally to San Benito County. Victor Mossop, who proudly claims kinship to the Chambers family, had provided us with a copy of the writing of Henry Chambers and his son, J.M. Chambers, for which we are grateful.

"Provisions were getting very short while the family camped near Visalia, so two or three men started out on foot for Fort Millerton, about 60 miles away, to get what they could carry on their backs, in order that the travelers would not starve to death in their new found home. They finally made the trip and the train again started out on their journey and came to Kings River, crossing over it I hardly know how, then along the riverbank to the foothills."

According to the story as it progressed, some of the party stopped there, and some went on to Fort Millerton to the gold diggings. "Pa, for one, prospected for awhile, then went to hunting for the market, furnishing the miners and soldiers with antelope meat, there being thousands of antelope on the plains at that time," Chambers related to his son. "Finally he and mother went up into the pinery to make shakes. While there the Indians went on the warpath, so they started for Millerton on foot, 25 miles, Pa carrying his rifle and some luggage, and Mother, and the baby, making it through all right."

The elder Chambers put the first wagon road into the pinery, and his wife was the first white woman there. They finally moved again, this time to Kings River, where Chambers took up property, part of it extending into the bottom and part on the plains. He built a house near the bluff overlooking the river bottom. This home, he relates, was finally moved out on the plains half a mile or so away on account of malaria being so bad near the river. But before moving into the house the family stopped for awhile with "Uncle Harry Akers, where I

was born, the 10th day of December, 1857, I being the third child," notes J.M. Chambers in his memoirs. In another part of the report of the Williams family on happenings in California in the middle 1800s, is an item about the weather and the storms. "In 1862 the river became very high, due to heavy rains and snow in the mountains. In 1867 came another big flood. I can remember it very well in some ways. It looked for awhile like the river was going to run over the plains. It looked like a moving ocean, with the large valley oaks showing just a little of their tops above the water. There was also a mass of logs of every size and description, with Tulare Lake full and running over into the San Joaquin River, nearly a solid body of water between the lake and the river.

"Tulare Lake kept about full for several years after this great flood, then it commenced to fall." Then Chambers made the following prediction: "Some of you young folks will likely experience the same thing again, only much worse on account of so many people living in the river and lake beds. If the people could only have seen it, their hair would stand on their heads. I have heard people say it will never happen again but I believe that what has been can be again and worse. 1864 was a very dry year. Pa and Grandpa Smoot moved their cattle down on the lower Kings River swamps. Then 1877 was another dry year."