

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Reliz Trail

In our search for historical episodes in Monterey County we have found an interesting and informative one relating to the Milpitas ranch and Mission San Antonio in 1849 as published in the San Jose Pioneer. The clipping was given to us by Mrs. Nxe Otis of Pacific Grove – a clipper and a hoarder who is now, she relates, trying to sort a collection of many years, some to destroy and others to distribute among interested friends. We were happy to receive the following historical record.

In 1849 all the immigrants traveling on the Santa Fe trail bound for the mines came by way of what is now Jolon and out into the Salinas Valley by way of Reliz Canyon (The Pioneer spells it Release) thence along the foothills through Natividad to San Juan, then via the Pacheco Pass on up to the Mother Lode country.

The old trail in Reliz Canyon was opened up by the CWA workers so that after nearly 100 years it was again open to travelers. That was 20 years ago and we have not been able to contact anyone who could verify the fact that the Reliz Canyon could now be traveled. Many of the immigrants who traveled the trail were a tough lot and robbed and mistreated the people living at San Antonio Mission, so much so that in 1850 they deserted the place.

The author of the Pioneer story relates that the mission buildings were then (1849) in good order with buildings on three sides of the square. To the left of the church looking south were the rooms of the Indians. Behind the mission was the garden with the adobe walls covered with tiles to protect them from the weather. The vineyard of several acres had a good adobe wall around it, tiled like that in the garden, and had a small adobe house, with a red tile roof, inside the enclosure.

Some of the grape vines were six inches or more in diameter. The vineyard and garden could be irrigated from the small stream behind the mission, but the plain in front when the mission was in full charge of the priests, was irrigated from a ditch that tapped the San Antonio River some two miles above on the way to the Milpitas ranch. Part of this ditch was dug in solid rock.

There were a good many people living at the mission, the 1849 reporter relates, but not very many at the

ranches, which were miles apart. Mariano Soberanes was at Los Ojitos, and Joaquin Soto at El Piojo, both having received Mexican grants about 1842. They were the principal landowners.

An Indian named Ignacio Pastor was living on a small ranch at the Milpitas – a property which later swelled to an 11-league ranch. At that time there was more travel through the Mission of San Antonio than at the present time. Most of the travel was on horseback, through Reliz Canyon, the carts of the native Californians with wooden axles and wooden wheels, generally passing by way of the mission, the Pioneer writes, to their ranches turning off to the right on passing the Questa, and coming in behind the mission, instead of going to Jolon first, as they do at present.

The San Jose Pioneer article of '49 relates that there were not many ranches then on the left side or the southeast bank of the Salinas River from Buena Vista to the mouth of Reliz Canyon by the Arroyo Seco - Santiago Estrada at Buena Vista, Malarin and Lugos being the only ones between Buena Vista and Soledad. The road was shorter then. William Richardson's house on the Coches was to the left near the Salinas River. There was no one living in Reliz Canyon, but there was plenty of deer and bear.

At that time (1849) a wagon or a cart could not pass up the canyon, there being only a horse trail. The first wagon road was made by hunters who sent their game to the San Francisco market. One could rarely go through without seeing a grizzly, according to the reports.

Most of the Sonorians, on their way to and from the mines passed through Reliz Canyon. It was a shorter road, had better grass, wood and water, good camping ground, and plenty of game.