

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 19, 1954

Years of Drought

There have been many references to the famous dry year of 1863-64 in past history of California. This dry year is estimated to have been the cause of most of the large land grant owners of Monterey County losing their properties – if not that year, it crippled them so badly they never recovered and eventually lost them.

In an old scrapbook we found a clipping from the San Francisco Bulletin dated March 19, 1864, that tells of the previous droughts, which we will give here, to give background to the 1863-64 drought, which is the worst recorded in the state's history.

The first dry year to be recorded was 1809-10. The drought was so severe that it was impossible to get fodder for the horses and cattle at the Monterey Presidio or at any of the missions in the county.

In 1820-21 the drought was worse than the one mentioned above as the number of people and livestock had increased so much that if it had not been for the shellfish at Monterey, the Soledad, San Antonio, Carmel and San Juan Missions would have suffered heavy losses.

After the drought of 1809 the San Antonio started the system which was soon adopted by the other missions of laying up subsistence, for two years, of corn, or dried beef, Manteca, etc. Fishermen were developed in each establishment to furnish food from the sea, not only in keeping Lent and Friday's abstinence, but in order that mussels and fish, being so plentiful, should be made to economize the stores and to supply the deficiencies of the pastures and sowings. Also the Indians were encouraged to gather pine nuts and acorns each year so that in case of a drought there would be food.

The season of 1824-25 for rains and feed is supposed to have been the best between 1770 and 1864, when the Bulletin article was written. But then came the great 22 months drought, 1828-30. So little rain fell that the springs and the wells all dried up in Monterey County. The little wells in Washerwomen's Bay (situated in El Estero opposite the cemetery) dried up and all the town washing had to be carried to the lake at the mouth of the Carmel River and all the drinking water had to be carried in barrels and skins from the same place.

A general killing of all mares of the mission was ordered to save what little feed there was for the best horses and cattle. Horses were driven off cliffs and others forced into the mire at the Tembladeras near Castroville, where they died like flies.

In the season of 1840-41, seven years after the secularization of the missions, no rain fell for the long term of 14 months. The Salinas plains were referred to as a "desert" during this period. The loss of animals was not so great during this year as in 1828-30 because very few sheep survived and consequently there was more feed left for cattle.

The drought of 1855-56 was specially disastrous as cattle were bringing a wonderful price due to the influx of miners. Then on top of everything else the rains of December 1856 and January 1857 were so cold that those cattle that had survived died from the cold. What few stock had survived were given so much attention, that, by 1863, the beginning of the great drought, there were stock scattered all over the country, as the adventurous settlers were getting further away from the beaten paths.

Stockmen had moved into the Sur section, which for years afterward was the place of last resort in dry years.

After the padres had experienced the first two dry years they established a rule that for every 1,000 head of cattle at least two leagues of land (about 9,000 acres) were necessary on good pasture and three leagues on poor land. However after gold was discovered ranchers started overstocking which is one of the reasons for the great losses in 1863-64.

Another factor was pointed out that the settlers were killing off the coyotes, eagles, hawks and the like so that the balance of nature was overthrown to the extent that the squirrels and gophers were eating all the food even in good years, so only half the crop could be gathered in many districts.