Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

June 27, 1955

The Mail Goes Through

As years pass it will soon be time for the centennial celebration of the first Pacific Overland Mai. And most of us have forgotten, or do not know, that the famed Butterfield Overland Mail was not the first. The first transcontinental postal service was the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line known casually as the "birch" or "jackass" mail. Butterfield started operating Sept 16, 1858. Birch's contract was effective July 1, 1857 for a four-year period, and his first mail for the Pacific Coast left San Antonio eight days later on July 9. He also pioneered for later operators the great desert mail route to the Southwest.

During last week's meeting of California Historical Societies held in Monterey, a group of about 30 members of the Overland Mail Centennial Committee held a luncheon meeting at the Pink Pizzeria to complete the regional organization and make tentative plans for the celebration in 1957. Ben F. Dixon, archivist of the Junipero Serra Museum of San Diego, is the overall chairman of the state committee.

The first transcontinental postal service route led from San Antonio to El Paso via Forts Clark, Lancaster and Davis; from El Paso via Mesilla, Tucson, the Pima village of the Gila Valley and Fort Yuma on the Colorado to San Diego. With the exception of a few miles in the Rio Grande, Mesilla and Gila valleys every step of the 1,500-mile route was through barren, burning desert.

The first mails were carried in any kind of desert conveyance the agents could round up for the job – army freight wagons, ambulances, Concord stages, horseback and mule pack. The contractor was James F. Birch, concerning whom Banning wrote in 1930, "Not as many as two consecutive pages of history or biography have heretofore been devoted to his memory."

The first mail was carried out of San Antonio by Conductor James F. Mason, a pioneer of Mason Valley, San Diego County. He was overtaken en route by Capt. Henry Skillman, who left with the second mail on the 24th. While Skillman returned to El Paso, Mason continued with both mails to San Diego. Supt. Woods went through with the third mail which left San Antonio August 9. On the same date, R.W. Laine left San Diego for San Antonio with the first eastbound mail.

Mason arrived in San Diego, it is reported, Aug. 30, 1857 – to the tune of 100 anvils and much other wild and boisterous rejoicing. Due to the unavoidable delays in pioneering, the time consumed in transit for the first dispatch was 53 days. But the second, which Capt. Skillman sped through the desert a part of the way in a light ambulance, made it in 34 days of actual travel time. The fifth mail from Texas to California arrived at San Diego in record time of 26 days and 12 hours.

Eastbound mail reached San Diego by coastal steamer from San Francisco and boat and stage from Los Angeles. Westbound mail arrived at San Antonio by stage from Indianola, to which thriving port it arrived by steamer from New Orleans. It is a moot question, according to Ben Dixon, whether any mail that actually traveled by this route from New York or Washington to San Francisco beat the fast sailing schedules of the Pacific Steamers on the Panama route.

James F. Birch, the contractor, appointed Isaiah C. Woods as his general superintendent immediately after receiving the contract for four years which provided two mails each way per month for four years, at an annual consideration of $149,800.

The first mail left San Antonio at 6 a.m., July 24, 1857 outfitted as follows:

"One coach and harness.

"Six men, well armed with rifles, and a Colt pistol to 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 in cash to purchase supplies on the route."