

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 17, 1957

The Overland Mail

"Overland to the Pacific" will be a theme of the meeting of the Conference of California Historical Societies to be held in San Diego June 20-21-22.

The meeting will mark the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first stage of the San Antonio and San Diego stage line, popularly known as "The Jackass Mail," premier overland stage route and forerunner of the Butterfield Overland Mail.

This mail line was operated first on a twice-a-month schedule, then weekly, until Aug. 2, 1861, when it was discontinued. When at the height of its operation, the average trip from San Diego to San Antonio consumed 21 days.

"Overland to the Pacific" first appeared as an advertisement in Texas a century ago at the head of a newspaper advertisement for the line. Passengers could ride in new coaches all the way, except for 100 miles in the Colorado desert where they went muleback. The first mail which left San Antonio for San Diego consumed 54 days in transit. Now an airmail letter from San Diego will arrive in San Antonio in the morning after leaving San Diego the evening before. John Butterfield, founder of the Pacific Overland Mail, told his employees: "Remember, Boys, nothing on God's earth must stop the United States Mail!"

We find on March 3, 1857, the last day of the administration of President Franklin Pierce, the passing of an act creating the Pacific Overland Mail. This was the consummation of a 10-year effort by Californians and the Post Office Department to secure adequate mail facilities between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Sen. Gwinn's long service in Congress was signaled by his work for the Pacific Railroad and Overland Mail. When the California Stage Co. was incorporated Jan. 1, 1854, its-organizers opened a powerful lobby for the efficient stage-operated overland mail delivery. In 1856, 75,000 Californians signed petitions to Congress demanding the service.

The climax of these significant events was the arrival in San Francisco at sunrise, Sept. 16, 1858, of the first overland stage from St. Louis, bringing eastern mail in less than 24 days. With it also came a writer for the New York Herald, W. O. Ormsby, who rode the first

stage all the way. His story of the long and tedious ride over prairies, mountain, and desert is one of two unique accounts of the establishment of the overland mail.

The first coaches of the Butterfield Overland Mail left simultaneously from the eastern termini (Tipton, Mo., and Little Rock, Ark.) and the western terminus (San Francisco). The stage line operated under a government mail subsidy of \$600,000 a year, on a weekly schedule and averaged 23 days for each one-way journey. The southern route was abandoned by order of Congress, March 22, 1861, and John Butterfield, founder of the line, was given a new contract to carry the mails between the Mississippi River and California via the central route on a 17-day schedule. ("California Through Four Centuries" was the source material for this information.)

The first rider of the famous Pony Express reached San Francisco from St. Joseph, Missouri. The Pony Express, organized by W. H. Russell, was destined to speed valuable mails between the Mississippi River and California. The average time in transit was 10 1/2 days. The express operated by relays. Each horse was ridden about 24 miles. The charge for carrying letters was \$5 per half-ounce. The service was abandoned in Nov. 1861, with the advent of the overland telegraph. The express boasted such noted horsemen as "Pony Bob" Haslam and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody.

In the Wells Fargo Museum in San Francisco, provided for the pleasure of the public and the patrons of the Wells Fargo Bank, there is an old Wells Fargo map, which names and marks the early pathfinders and pioneer carriers with the dates of their service.

Beginning with Gen. Coronado, 1540, the list continues: Jedediah Smith, 1846; Gen. John C. Fremont, 1842; John Bidwell, 1841; Gen. S. W. Kearney, 1846; E. X. Aubrey's record ride, 1847; Donner Party, 1846; Camel Corps, 1857; Jones Russell Stage Line, 1858; Hannibal & St. Jo Railroad, 1859; Russell-Majors Waddell Stage Line, 1860; and Steamer Far West, 1876.