

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 11, 1957

Our First Schools

A chapter in Dr. Rockwell's newly published book "California Firsts" tells many interesting facts concerning the first schools and high educational institutions in California. This chapter begins with a paragraph written by William P. Atkinson:

"No one therefore, should be discouraged from studying history. Its greatest service is not so much to increase our knowledge as to stimulate thought and broaden our intellectual horizon, and for this purpose no study is its equal.

California's first state constitution, drafted at Monterey in the autumn of 1849, made provision for a common school system, declaring, "The legislature shall encourage, by all suitable means, the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral and agricultural improvement." Thus it is quite natural to conclude, as in the words of one writer, that "The California public school system was born at the Constitutional Convention, which met in Monterey in Sept., 1849."

But the actual establishment of the school system under the constitution did not come until 1851, when the second legislature took action. The first school of which there is official record, was opened in the Pueblo de San Jose, in 1794, although there were several private and religious schools in the state during the Spanish and Mexican periods. However, too much importance must not be connected to this San Jose school for it lasted but two short years. The first school in Monterey, established in 1796, had an equally short life. As we know leading families often sent their children to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) to be educated, as did Thomas Oliver Larkin of Monterey.

A notable event occurred in 1834, when William E.P. Hartnell, an Englishman who had married a senorita of the de la Guerra family of Santa Barbara, established near Monterey a private school which he called "El Colegio de San Jose." Hartnell's ambitious program included three R's, English, French, German and Latin, as well as some philosophy, bookkeeping, and Christian doctrine.

Dr. Hunt writes in "California Firsts" that one report has it that the first American school was in Santa Clara as early as the autumn of 1844. A certain young woman

who had just come to California, seeing youth growing up in ignorance taught a few children the elements of education, her sole equipment being one colored pencil—no slate or pencil for the children.

Credit goes to Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell, a teacher from Ohio, as teacher of the first American school in California. Mrs. Isbell and her husband Dr. Isbell, had migrated from Illinois in 1846. She settled at Santa Clara, where she was persuaded to instruct a little group of children. With almost no equipment in a small room of "the fast crumbling Santa Clara Mission," she taught from December, 1846, to March, 1847, when the family moved to Monterey. Here she conducted school for three months more. It was here that Walter Colton and Robert Semple, founders of California's first newspaper first publicly agitated for general education.

Several other schools were started during the early Gold Rush period, notably one founded by the Rev. Samuel Willey in Colton Hall in March, 1849, and one by the Rev. Albert Williams in San Francisco later that year.

Three educational conferences were held leading to the actual chartering of a college in California. First of these was held in San Jose in January, 1851 at which the "founding of an institution of the grade of a university" was recommended. The second, in May, was held in San Francisco, where the location was and the third in late June, in Santa Clara. Santa Clara was chosen as the site and the name was to be California Wesleyan College, which, however, was soon changed to University of Pacific. A charter was granted by the State Supreme Court in July 1851.

The opening of the new College of the Pacific did not occur until Monday, May 3, 1852. In 1871 the college moved from Santa Clara to College Park, San Jose, and there it remained until 1924, when it moved to its present location in Stockton. In 1911, the name was again changed from the University of the Pacific to the College of the Pacific, "to conform more closely to the type and scope of the work undertaken," according to Dr. Rockwell Hunt a former student and professor of the college, now in his 90th year, with 17 books to his credit. Dr. Hunt is president emeritus of the Conference of California Historical Societies. Because of his consuming interest in the history of the state, Dr. Hunt was named "Mr. California" by the Governor of California.