

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Measuring by 'Vara'**

For those who now live in these parts who are not familiar with the meaning of some of the Spanish or early day expressions they hear or read, we are interested today in the creation and length of a "vara."

One hardly knows what to do with a fact like this, even when you have succeeded in grasping it, but if you wish to study early California history and realize that some of these early Spanish grants were not measured in terms of footage lots or acreage, it is necessary to know the length of a vara. All early deeds are recorded and expressed in this term. When people refer airily to 50 or 100 vara lots, with quick addition we should be able to come pretty near the accurate measurement of the land being discussed.

The Mexicans, it seems, sometimes employed methods of measurements that in these days of hair-splitting precision possess a certain charming relaxation.

In marking off a large piece of land, they frequently tied one end of a lariat to a vaquero's saddle, and the other end to another vaquero's saddle. The first vaquero would ride ahead along the line of measurement until the lariat was taut. Then the second would come up from behind and advance until it stretched tight again, and so on, until the measurement was completed.

They were horsemen, we were told, and you could not expect them to get down off their horses and walk.

It was generally the custom to keep track of the number of lariat lengths by putting a pebble in the pocket for each length marked off. Another practice was the "cigarette method." A large grant holder would sometimes measure his land by the number of cigarettes a vaquero could smoke while riding at a certain pace from one end of the grant to another. Naturally, he would have to smoke at a certain pace, too. He could not stop. He would have to smoke one right after another.

But to get back to the vara, it is said that it was originally known, in Mexican antique history, as "Solomon's pace." Under this very early system of measurement, there were 1,000 paces of Solomon to a mile, and three miles to a league. In Spanish colonial times, "Solomon's pace" in Mexico and other Latin-

American countries became the vara, and it was stabilized at roughly 33 inches.

In looking through various lists of measurements we find variations exist. The Cuban and Philippine vara, for instance, measures 33.38 inches; the Brazilian vara, 43 inches and the Texas vara, 33.33 inches.

Once upon a time, scientists, as scientists will, undertook to determine the exact length of the San Francisco vara, which is also used in Mexico and Honduras, and have discovered that it measures 32.99311 inches. Surveyors and others concerned, however, saw no reason to quibble over the lacking .00689 of an inch, and called it an even 33 inches. This has been legally accepted and established as the official length of our California vara unit. It is the result of this survey that San Francisco still has three major districts that are referred to in the City Engineer's office and even legally as "vara districts."

The late Jo Mora, author of "Californios" and "Trail Dust, and Saddle Leather" and one of the west's best known artists, wrote this description of surveying in the early days of California: "The district alcalde gathered together his surveying equipment-consisting of two witnesses and a 50 foot reata - and set out for the land designated in the application. They started from a common monument, the initial post, which was generally a pile of stones.

"Then on their horses the alcalde and his witnesses measured out with 50-foot reata the desired chunk of terra firma, and before long there it was, all staked out, recorded, and witnessed. All the settler had to do was to scratch the virgin sod, drop in a few garbanzos, and watch them grow."