

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 25, 1958

### Trip to New Idria

If a drive in the spring is in the offing, we suggest a motor trip to New Idria Mines in San Benito County.

We made this delightful journey a few days ago, our first visit all the way to the mine although we have traveled many times as far as Paicines just to enjoy the scenery, the wild flowers and to absorb California history of this back country so accessible to Monterey. If you make the trek start early, take your lunch, stop frequently for the sight of beautiful mountains, canyons, and grain field, as well as just to relax. Be sure you have plenty of gasoline in the tank for there was none available when we arrived at the mine, and plan to spend a full day away from home.

A wildflower book, a map of the country and a camera are also recommended a item of luggage, as well as an old history of Monterey or San Benito County as a reference. We wish we had taken along the history on our trip instead of reading it after our return.

Mildred Brooke Hoover's "Historic Spots in California" is even a better volume to accompany any trip through California. It has a full index, complete history of all landmarks of principal interest and historical importance in the State. Joining with Mrs. Hoover in the publication were Hero Eugene Rensch and Ethel Grace Rensch, Stanford Press is the publishers.

The Idria Quicksilver Mine, where work began in the '50's, lies on the slope below San Carlos Peak. The date of the discovery of this ore deposit is unknown, Mrs. Hoover tells us, but tradition says that the Mission Fathers, before the coming of the Americans, made assays of it and determined it to be cinnabar. The soil is the same beautiful red-brown that the visitor to Almaden Quicksilver Mines in Santa Clara County observes.

Bret Harte in his "Story of a Mine," attributes the accidental discovery of the first quicksilver in the region to a group of prospectors who were burning specimens of rock to test it for silver and were surprised to find a pool of "liquid silver" in the ashes of their improvised furnace.

With actual records which go back to 1854, it ranks among the most famous quicksilver mines of the world. The name "New Idria." was copied from the Idria Mine

in Austria. The same square type of furnace used here at first but was replaced long ago by a more effective type. We were unable to tour the mine because it was Saturday and the miners' day off. The men who remained there over the weekend were taking advantage of the sunshine and occupying the many beaches which decorated most of the front porches of the bunkhouses and office buildings of the small community. Spanish seemed to be the language spoken by most of the bench occupants.

On the top of the hill approached over the path of red cinnabar stands the neatly painted schoolhouse, above the door of which appears the name "New Idria". All the other directional signs leave off the "New" and simply read "Idria."

We further learned that in 1861 William Brewer of the Whitney Geologic Survey kept a record of the findings of the party on a visit paid to this region. They visited three mines, the New Idria, the San Carlos, and the Aurora, all within a radius of a few miles. They found the square furnace of the New Idria and the excavation of the San Carlos at almost double that elevation. The two mines, not then under the same management, were later consolidated into company. Ore from the higher mine, however, was treated at the New Idria works even at that early time, when it was hauled down the mountainside by means of ox teams. In later years iron buckets suspended from a cable have lowered the ore to be treated.

In 1861 Brewer reported that he and his party wandered "mole like" for six hours; a part of this time they were "1,000 feet from daylight."

At the time of Brewer's visit a force of between 200 and 300 men were employed at the New Idria mines. The crew has since varied below and above that number, but work has continued practically all these years. The mines were sold in 1898, we have learned from "Historic Spots in California," to a company of men who formed the New Idria Quicksilver Mining Company, the name under which it still exists today. During the war the place was policed by a company of soldiers.