

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 26, 1960

Early California Mails

During the Spanish and Mexican periods of California history, there was irregular mail service from Loretto to Monterey, letters being carried by Indian runners or in frequent trading sips. Most of the mail was either to the missions or the commanders of the various military organizations. There were no post offices either under Spanish or Mexican rule.

Even when the Americans took over California, there was little occasion for mail, except between military posts, but with the discovery of gold and the influx of thousands of gold miners, there arose a tremendous demand for mail facilities.

Monterey's Post Office was 111 years old on February 23rd. It is true that Capt. William Marcy's appointment as postmaster was made in November 1848, but he started work on Feb. 23rd, 1849 – after all that is the really significant date. Had the good ship "California" failed to make port, he might not have worked at all!

Although no great civic event has ever been planned in honor of the occasion, effective work has been done in the past to make certain that people are aware of the date when a post office and mail came to Monterey. In 1849, with the active support of the postmaster and our representatives in Washington, the City of Monterey, the Centennial Executive Committee, the County of Monterey and the Monterey Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, succeeded in attaining approval of a special cancellation stamp. Paul Whitman of Pebble Beach designed the stamp, while cost of the dies was met by the City of Monterey.

During the next six months each outgoing piece of first class mail – and there were literally millions – bore the impression of the stamp, showing Monterey's Colton Hall, and advertising the California Constitutional Convention Centennial.

Philatelists everywhere flooded the chamber of commerce with requests for "first day covers" bearing a special cachet, designed by Myron Oliver of Monterey and showing the Old Cuartel, in which Monterey's post office was opened for the first time 100 years before.

An act of Congress approved August 14, 1848 authorized Postmaster General C. Johnson to appoint an agent, to establish post offices and name

postmasters (subject to approval in Washington) for California. William Van Vothies was named agent, and under his instructions post offices were to be established at Monterey, San Francisco, San Diego, San Pedro, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo. The same order fixed the rate of postage at 40 cents for letters not exceeding a half ounce between any office in California and any office on the Atlantic coast, and 12 ½ cents (one bit) between California post offices.

While stamps were at all times available, the great bulk of California's first mail was paid for in cash by the sender, with the postmaster or an assistant marking the letter paid, with date and amount of postage, by pen and ink. The relatively few letters that have survived the more than a century since California mails were started, are valued collector's items.

In 1851 an effort was made to bridge the continent by pack mule mail service which operated briefly between Placerville and Salt Lake City, Utah, where it connected with uncertain stagecoaches running to the Mississippi.

Three other overland mail services came into existence before the advent of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. The first was the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line, familiarly known as the "Jackass Mail," in 1857. The second was the Butterfield Overland Mail, which operated from 1858 to 1861, carrying mail and passengers from the Missouri River Valley to San Francisco. The third was the Pony Express organized to handle mail from San Francisco to the Mid-West in 1860.

Plans for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Pony Express are now being formulated for 1960.