

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 5, 1960

1960 Keepsake

All members of The Book Club of California have received the first six numbers of the 1960 Keepsake, consisting of 12 folders, each folder dealing with some phase of California mail during the Gold Rush period. The Grabhorn Press of San Francisco designed and printed the series and Edgar B. Jessup, M. C. Nathan and Henry H. Clifford were the editors and loaned the illustrations from their collections for the folders.

The first of the Early California Mail Bag series relates to the history of the 40 cent rate period in California and the "Stamplless" covers by Basil C. Pearce, secretary of the Western Covers Society.

Starting events in California during the late 1840's made it necessary that some system of regular mail service be established as soon as possible. With the gold discovery on Jan. 24, 1848, and the ceding of California by Mexico on Feb. 2nd, one week later, the rush of the 49'ers was on. What little mail there had been prior to these events went by whaling boats or military couriers. Congress and the administration in Washington thus took steps to set up some workable plan with the result that the state had the first period of postal service extending to California and also title to this story, "The 40 Cent Rate Period 1847-1851."

In October 1848, William Van Voorhies was appointed mail agent for California by Secretary of State James Buchanan. Congress had by Act of March 3, 1847, authorized the postmaster general to contract for the conveyance of United States mail to and from the Pacific Coast via Charges, Panama, and San Francisco, to Astoria – "our pioneer settlement of the Pacific. The act fixed the letter rates at 40 cents per half ounce.

The Ocean Mail, via Isthmus of Panama, was to be established on a route extending from New York City, by mail steamer via Havana to Charges, across the Isthmus to Panama City and thence by mail steamer to San Francisco. Although the ocean contracts were made in the late forties, service actually commenced with the sailing from New York of the new steamship "California" on Oct 6, 1848. Although gold was discovered in January, the California left New York without a single passenger for the Pacific Coast as the glowing rumors of the great gold rush was not taken seriously at that time.

Leaving Panama dangerously over-loaded by 300 extra passengers, the California headed for San Francisco. She stopped briefly at Monterey so that William Van Voorhies, recently appointed U.S. mail agent dispatched to California to establish our first post offices, could establish our first official post office and appoint a postmaster at this old Spanish capital.

A very heavy mail to and from California was conveyed during the 40 cent period with none of the current stamps available in California, and all that period (27 months) less than half a dozen covers from the east are known to collectors bearing these 1847 stamps, which were available at all post offices back there.

Members of the Book Club of California have just been informed that Robert E. Bell took over May 1st from Mrs. Elizabeth Downs as secretary of the Book Club of California, Mrs. Downs leaves a position she has held for 14 years, after taking over from Oscar Lewis, the western writer and historian, who held the office for 20 years. An author and librarian with a masters degree in Americana from Harvard, Bell has been with the Fort Worth Public Library for the past five years. He is the author of a first novel, "The Butterfly Tree." The Book Club is a non-profit association of people interested in fine printing, fine books, with emphasis of Western Americana.