

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

June 2, 1960

Little Sur In 1887

The Little Sur section in 1887 had a population of nearly 100 persons and maintained a large school attendance. It was at the mouth of the Little Sur River that the big steamship, Ventura, was wrecked in 1884 or 1885. From this wreck came such plunder, such as wagons, draperies, etc. and many coast dwellers had more valuable furnishings than their buildings were worth in the opinion of the late Dr. L. D. D. Roberts, in his description of the coast country written many years ago.

Far up the north fork of the Little Sur lived Happy Harry Moreton and next to him was Issac Swettman and family, Jim Williams on the north side of Pico Blanco also Joe Smith, and on the south side lived a stranger by the name of Peirce. His neighbor was the eccentric and well-known banjo player, Al Clark. These were on the south fork with the well know Pate family, whose son, John, was blinded for life on the Garrapata Ridge with a charge of buck shot.

We now come to the El Sur or Cooper grant of many thousand acres that stretches from the Little Sur River over the mountains to the south side of the Big Sur river. On the shore about the center of the big grant lies the Big Mora, a 400-foot rock that frequently is surrounded by water. In the shadow of the big rock lived a man by the name of Mideven, whose business was killing fur seals. It was on top of this rock that the U.S. government, with Capt. Smith in full charge, built a lighthouse. When completed, John F. Ingelsal was installed as head keeper, with Peter Hansen, Charles Howland and others as assistants.

It was here in the year 1894, April 21, 10:30 p.m., that the big steamer, Los Angeles, was wrecked and as the sun rose the next morning a sorry sight met the eye, never to be forgotten. The shore was strewn for miles with wreckage, consisting of hundreds of crates of oranges, lemons, grapefruit, cheese, butter, etc. Even 150 calves along the beach with some dead. Of the 300 passengers, some were wounded and all sick enough to die. But still the captain and first mate were clinging to the masts, but a few feet above the waves and breakers. They were all removed by the lighthouse men. Dr. Roberts spent three days and nights at this unfortunate scene. It was but a year later that the ship

"Cyclone" piled up against the base of this lighthouse rock, a total loss, but no lives lost. The ship's nameplates were placed on Dr. Roberts' cabin door.

Dr. Roberts continues on to describe the residents and happenings of the isolated coast country even before there was the paved highway now known as the Carmel-San Simeon Highway. On the Cooper grant lived temporarily J. B. H. Cooper and his family together with their help of farmers, dairymen and cowboys. It was here on the banks of the Big Sur that Cooper built a large dance hall and annually gave a free public barbecue and dance to all who cared to come and they came a plenty from far and near. They dance to the old style banjo, guitar, accordion and fiddle, played by such men as Al Clark, Cheny Croiscola, Eddie Romiro and E Soberanes.

An abundance of the finest barbecued steer meat, together with full portions of olives, bread and red wine were served. And the host insisted on always having at least one dance with every lady present. When the party ended at sunup, Dr. Roberts wrote, he doubted if there was happier man in all of California than Mr. Cooper, who had his share and gave to others so much pleasure. "I wish to add that now in 1942 all this vast domain is owned by Harry Hunt of Pebble Beach. Mr. J. B. H. Cooper died of a heart attack."

In leaving the Cooper grant, going up the Big Sur one found a Mr. Snow and a Mr. Finnegan. "This man Finnegan never was seen except in company of two large bloodhounds. He was also killed when his team ran away on the coast road. Mr. Snow (by hiding away in the mountains for some time) just escaped a necktie party I was invited to by John Gilky and others, for the shooting of Billy Hansen," Dr. Roberts recalled.

Up the Big Sur the next settlers were the Woold brothers and they with the Bradford brothers and others formed a company to operate a sawmill, failed and moved out.