

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The County's Driest Years

Because we have been hearing and reading so much about a dry year, lack of water predictions and past years of drought, we did some personal research into history and have come across some interesting data as pertains to Monterey County and California in general.

There was the famous dry year of 1863-64 when it was estimated to have been the cause of most of the large grant owners of the county to lose their property - If not that year then it crippled them so badly they never recovered and eventually lost them.

We found in an old scrapbook a clipping from the San Francisco Bulletin of March 19, 1864, that tells of the previous droughts which will give a background to the 1863-64 drought which was the worst recorded in California history.

The first dry year to be recorded was 1809-10. The drought was so severe that it was impossible to get fodder for the horses and cattle at the Monterey Presidio or at any of the missions in the county.

In 1820-21 the drought was worse than the one just mentioned as the number of people and livestock had increased so much that if it had not been for the shellfish at Monterey, the Soledad, San Antonio, Carmel and San Juan Missions would have suffered heavy losses.

After the drought of 1809, the San Antonio Mission started the system which was soon adopted by the other missions that of laying up subsistence for two years of corn or dried beef, manteca, etc. Fishermen were developed in each establishment to furnish food from the sea, not only in keeping lent and Friday's abstinence but in order that mussels and fish, being so plentiful, should be made to economize the stores and to supply the deficiencies of the pastures and sowings. Also, the Indians were encouraged to gather pine nuts and acorns each year so that in case of a drought there would be food.

The season of 1824-25 for rains and feed is supposed to have been the best between 1770 and 1864 when the Bulletin article was written. But then came the great 22 months of drought, 1828-30. So little rain fell that the springs and wells all dried up in Monterey County. The little wells in Washerwomens' Bay (situated in El Estero

opposite the cemetery) dried up and all the town washing had to be carried to the lake at the mouth of the Carmel River and all the drinking water had to be carried in barrels and skins from the same place. A general killing of all mares by the mission was ordered to save what little feed there was for the best horses and cattle.

The season of 1840-41, seven years after the secularization of the missions was one in which no rain fell for a long term of 14 months. The Salinas plains were referred to as "desert" during this period. The loss of animals was not so great during this year as in 1828-30 because very few sheep survived and consequently there was more feed left for cattle.

The drought of 1855-56 was especially disastrous as cattle were bringing a wonderful price due to the influx of miners. Then on top of everything else the rains of December 1856 and January 1857 were so cold that those cattle that survived died from the cold. Stockmen had moved into the Sur country, where for years afterward was the place of last resort in dry years. After the padres had experienced the first two dry years they established a rule that for every thousand head of cattle at least two leagues of land (about 9,000 acres) were necessary on good pasture and three leagues on poor land. However after gold was discovered ranchers started overstocking which is one of the reasons for the great losses in 1863-64.

Another factor was pointed out that settlers were killing off the coyotes, hawks and like so that the balance of nature, was overthrown to the extent that squirrels and gophers were eating all the food even in good years, so that only half a crop could be gathered in many districts.