

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Stage Coach Santa

This is a story of a strange stagecoach Santa of Jolon which was seen by a little boy along the old Jolon road near Mission San Antonio on Christmas Eve 1881. We discovered the tale in an old scrapbook given to the Monterey History and Art Assn. by the late Victor Mossop, a long-time member who was made an honorary member a number of years ago because of his devotion to the history of Monterey County.

Moonlight trickled slowly through the low-hanging clouds along the Santa Lucia mountains and plummeted into the ancient valley of the Mission San Antonio, and finally up the small gullies and ravines along the old stagecoach road to the east of Jolon.

One telltale shaft of light from this brilliant December moon outlined the figure of a small boy crouched behind some rocks and hidden by undergrowth.

Once he left his hiding place and went to the middle of the road, which was nothing more than two wagon ruts squirming off into the night. He seemed to be waiting for something, for somebody. It was Christmas Eve, 1881, and Carl Edward Browne, age 8, was waiting for Santa Claus to come in on the southbound stage from Soledad.

Carl Edward remembered it had been only that morning when his father said rather exasperatingly, "I've told you time and again, son, that Santa Claus will be here tonight because he will come in by the stagecoach."

"Well," said Carl Edward, "I know he can't come by sled. We ain't got no snow here like we had in Ohio."

"When you wake up tomorrow morning," his father said, "you'll find your Christmas stocking will be filled and you will have a fine time with all your presents, wait and see son. Wait and see."

The youngster had been worried about Santa's arrival ever since the family moved out to this 160-acre ranch near the stagecoach stop at Jolon. And his father had told him that Santa would arrive by coach. It was always the same.

So, there he was waiting beside the road for the night coach to come in. He would see Santa probably riding with Charlie Moran, the grizzled old driver who waved at him from his perch high up atop the stage. Not that

he believed Santa would not arrive, but maybe Charlie would not recognize him. Maybe Charlie would not stop at the Brown's ranch a few hundred feet from the road. Carl Edward had crawled out of his bedroom window just to make sure everything was going to be all right for his first Christmas in California.

Suddenly from down the road he could hear the horses. Out of the flickering shadows which skittered and pranced nervously in the valley meadow the boy saw the team moving in the moonlight. And he heard the long wail of the horn which Charlie always blew to warn the hostlers at the inn to get ready.

Carl Edward shivered with excitement as the hoofs drummed nearer. He edged back into the brush, as if the driver could see him. Then through the night the team was upon him. He heard someone yell, "Come on Prancer, you lop-eared no good, flea-bitten varmit! You, too, Blitzen! Keep moving!"

High atop the coach perched a big fat man with a conical shaped hat which fell down over one eye. His long whiskers floated behind him, as if trying to keep up with their reckless owner. "Why it's Santa himself driving," Carl Edward thought. And they weren't horses, they were reindeer. He could see their antlers silhouetted in the flitting moonlight. It was Santa, not coming as a passenger, but driving his own reindeer, "Gee, it's true."

When Santa did not stop at the Browne ranch, Carl Edward, only 8, started to cry. He walked slowly back to the sprawling ranch house and let himself in his bedroom window and back to bed.

When his mother woke him in the morning with the announcement, he had better come quick to see what Santa had left for him, Carl Edward was startled and said, "But how could he? He went on by, I saw him. I saw him." He was amazed when he beheld the sparkling Christmas tree and all the presents in his stocking and under the tree.

Later that day Jack Browne walked into the inn at Jolon. Near the stove sat the driver, Charlie Moran, munching on a fist-sized chaw of tobacco.

Charlie, you old rascal, that was a wonderful stunt. My kid sneaked out last night and saw you ride by. He told us all about it. He swears it was Santa Claus and his reindeer instead of you and the team. Did you tie deer antlers on them horses?" Carl's father asked.

Charlie looked long and speculatively out of the window toward the green hills and sighed. "Funny thing about that, Jack, you're the third person that's said they'd seen Santa Claus last night. You see, what makes it funny is the fact that there, ain't been a stagecoach out of Soledad for three days."