

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Returning Home

I returned to the land of my birth, Tulare in the San Joaquin Valley, a week ago after several years' absence and was delighted to see all the activity, all the improvements and many old friends of high school days. I have heard it said that such a return is a mistake, and nothing is the same and the visitor is almost always disappointed in the result. I was not; I enjoyed every minute of my three-day visit.

Leaving Monterey, we traveled south through King City cut across through the mountain over the Peach Tree Grade and into Coalinga (where it was hot) then on through the oil fields to Tulare.

Tulare is set in a pleasant country of cotton fields, vineyards, walnut groves, and valley oaks. As the population of two cities, Tulare and Visalia, increases, the open space between tends to fill up and to become continuously inhabited. Tulare, born when the railroad came through the county in 1872 was incorporated in 1888 and like Visalia, became a charter city in 1923.

Both cities are so fond of their valley oaks that they save islands of them in paved streets, rather than cut them down. Valley oaks give graceful shade in front and back yards, adorn walnut groves, lend charming accents to the landscape and especially to Mooney Grove between the two cities. This pleasure park preserves a magnificent strand of valley oaks, purchased in 1909 by Tulare County the very trees that drew comment from Spanish explorers.

My father Frank P. Hayes, went to Tulare County as a young man of 22 years. I can still remember many rides I took with him from a cattle range outside Tulare to other properties he owned or leased from there to Lindsay or to the county around Tulare Lake and listening to stories he would tell about the land and the lake.

Cotton and water were non-existent in those days. Nor were there many of the beautiful citrus and olive groves or vegetable fields then.

Tulare Lake's former basin is now reclaimed land. It once was 44 miles long from north to south and 27 miles wide. The scene there reminds one of the story of John Flaxman who in the flood season of 1862 tried to run a sternwheel steamboat from the San Joaquin River

to Tulare Lake. His steamer grounded, the flood subsided and for years afterward the hull and the skeleton wheel were landmarks of a dry plain.

In 1955 W.W. Robinson wrote a short history of Tulare County in which he tells the story of the several explorers who visited Tulare County in the early 1800s, including Jedediah Smith and his trappers and Joseph R. Walker, who crossed the Sierra Nevada in 1822, and became the first white man to get a glimpse of Yosemite Valley and for whom Walker's pass was named. There also was a distinguished trapper John C. Fremont with Kit Carson as his guide.

"What a valley it was in 1948! Walter Colton writing of the great Tulare plain in that year, told of seeing a band of wild horses' rushing down like a forming torrent to the sea'...They swept past us heeding us as little as the Niagara the reeds that tremble on its bank. The very ground shook with the thunder of their hoofs.

Although I did not have sufficient time to visit Giant Forest and the Gen. Grant National Park, I remember former visits there with great pleasure. Congress on Sept. 25, 1890, took thought of the biggest and oldest trees in the world and their unmatched setting in the mountains of Tulare County. The area was established as Sequoia National Park—within which Giant Forest was—second national park in the United States. Gen. Grant National Park was established in 1890. Fifty years later March 4, 1940, Kings Canyon National (into which Gen. Grant was absorbed, was brought into being.

According to W. W. Hutchinson's writings these acts—"have preserved for the whole public much of the grandest scenery of the world—Tulare County's favored portion of the mighty Sierra Nevada Range, giant sequoias, the primitive wilderness areas with their canyons, streams, lakes, meadows, wildlife and magnificent features—ease of access from valley towns and main highways."