

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Recollections of A Pioneer

I have just finished a book entitled "Recollections of a Pioneer" published in 1907 by the late Carlisle S. Abbott of Salinas. I heartily recommend it if a reader ever gets the opportunity to borrow a copy.

It is better than any wild west story to be seen on television and all true for it recalls his experiences from 1850 on until he settled in the Salinas Valley many years ago, and up until almost the time of his death.

The book was written after Mr. Abbott had passed his eight-eighth birthday. Abbott was born, so he relates, in a large farm house on the eastern shores of Lake Memphremagor, about 12 miles north of the line between Canada and Vermont, on the 26th day of February, 1828, where he lived, loved, strived and fought. The family originally consisted of seven sons and three daughters.

After many dreadful experiences with the Indians they finally arrived in the gold country.

We will now skip all the horrible details of the Indian troubles, the conditions, fights and sadness in the gold rush days at the mines and skip to 1865 when Mr. Abbott moved to the Salinas Valley where he leased from David Spence two leagues of land (eight thousand eight hundred and eighty acres) for a term of five years, at the annual rental of five hundred dollars, with the privilege of purchasing, the west half of the ranch for the sum of 15,000 dollars. There for some years he engaged in the dairying business, milking fifteen hundred cows.

That part of Salinas Valley west of Salinas was then covered with great tall mustard, while in the easterly direction it was good grazing country. There was then a small stage station consisting of a cabin and a barn at the present site of Salinas.

"I had lumber hauled from Watsonville, and built a residence and out-buildings at the present Sugar Company's big factory. In those years there were only two other buildings between my residence and the Oak Grove House below Soledad, one of which was the deep well state station, a cabin occupied by David Spence on the river road.

"In 1872 I was honored by being made one of California's delegates to the National Republican Convention that nominated President Grant for his second term. In 1875 I was elected a member of the California Assembly and was reelected in 1877."

Mr. Abbott fathered, or promoted, the organization of the Monterey and Salinas Railroad from Salinas to Monterey, a distance of twenty miles. This enabled the farmers to ship their grain to tide water, and resulted in a great saving in freight. But the big competitor the Southern Pacific, reduced their prices and the farmers withdrew their patronage from the little railroad and went to their ancient enemy.

In 1874 Mr. Abbott built the Abbott House, and in 1876-7 California experienced the driest season since the American occupation, the rain fall in the Salinas Valley being less than five inches.

Mr. Abbott writes this amusing story "I think I may here with propriety mention two incidents in connection with the Monterey and Salinas Railway Company of which I was president.

"Wishing to avoid the importunities of people who I knew would be clamoring for free transportation, I proceeded to procure from the Board of Directors to pass a resolution forbidding the president issuing such transportation.

"While this restriction was in effect forced, the Rev. Mr. McGowan, and Episcopalian minister then residing in Salinas, supported by a large delegation of women of his congregation, solicited from me a pass from Salinas to Monterey and return and while I was desirous of advancing religious affairs, at least to the small extent that would be accomplished by issuance of free transportation to this gentleman, I was at a loss for a method of getting around the resolution above referred to.

"It occurred to me that if the Rev. Mr. McGowan could by some means be classed as an employee of the company, the way would be clear for my company to comply with his request, and after a little reflection it occurred to me that above all things else our little railroad needed a chaplain, whereupon I had the secretary enter upon his books an order appointing the Rev. Mr. McGowan as chaplain of the Monterey and Salinas Valley Railroad Company and then I handed him his pass.

"I hereby mention the dirtiest political trick with which I was ever connected. There was to be a Democratic rally at the old town of Monterey which was to be addressed by some celebrity from San Francisco, and the chairman of Democratic Central Committee came to me and asked me what the lowest rate would be for running an excursion on the night of the meeting. I told him that it was not a question of rates that I was going to run a free train on that night.

"I then telegraphed the Republican State Central Committee to send the best speaker they had to Salinas for the same night of this meeting in Monterey and then I set some men at work putting temporary sides on a train of 40 flat cars, and placed benches to seat the passengers.

"On the day of the speaking, I had notices posted announcing a free excursion from Monterey to Salinas, and practically the entire population of Monterey came over to our Republican meeting at Salinas, while the Democratic orator and his few friends, who refused to desert him, remained at the old Capital.

"Conditions at that time were not what they are now, and then pretty nearly everything excepting scuttling a ship or cutting a throat was considered perfectly proper in matters political; yet at the same time as I look back upon the incident, I do not think it very creditable and make this confession to show that I am repentant."