

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Santa Clara School

When Dr. and Mrs. Isbell and their party reached Santa Clara the people were suffering. They were poorly housed and camp fever broke out. There were not enough well ones to care for the sick, according to Mrs. Isbell, who open the first schools in California taught by an English-speaking teacher, one in Santa Clara and one in Monterey.

The children in Santa Clara were running wild, so Mrs. Isbell reported outside the mission walls and getting into danger. Because of all these conditions, a room 15 feet square that had been used as a stable was cleaned and fitted up for a school. Some of the tiles were taken from the roof to let light in and let out the smoke from the fire built on the floor. Here in this little room, Mrs. Isbell caught the first English in California, commencing about December 15, 1846.

The above description of the school in Santa Clara was first printed in April of 1923 in the Santa Paula Chronicle, as told to Nellie Bercaw. The story was reprinted on May 31, 1951, in the same publication.

In the Santa Clara school, Mrs. Isbell recalled as she told the story at Santa Paula, the seats were boxes and a few crude benches. There was one small table at which the 18 or 20 children took turns writing with a quill pen. She told a niece, Miss Mattie Mann of Concordia, Kansas, when the latter visited her in California at the age of 10 years, that at this first school (Santa Clara) she did not have pencils or paper so she traced a single letter of the alphabet in the palms of the children's hands with charcoal.

There were no desks. The books were such as had been brought across the Plains: five or six McGuffey's readers, which were passed from hand to hand; spellers were more plentiful. Two or three arithmetics, the same number of geographies, and three slates completed the outfits.