

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 2, 1968

Interesting Bit of History

A news item contained in an old scrapbook dated May 1, 1899, headed "Interesting Bit of History," has this to relate concerning Monterey and its city seal:

"At the trial of the suit of Monterey City vs. a townsman in the superior court on Tuesday, E.L. Williams testified that the Ayuntamiento (common council) of Monterey adopted a seal on May 10, 1850, when he was clerk of the council, as he read from the minutes of that date the description of the seal adopted." Mr. Williams further testified that the seal was a piece of round brass, without the present lever attachment as it now appears, that such attachments were not in use, nor known 49 years ago! And that the impressions on the paper issued by the trustees, Phillips, Osio and Callahan to David Jacks, were the genuine impressions from the seal adopted in 1850, though now used with the lever attachments for convenience, it having been designed to be used in the old times on sealing wax.

"The testimony of Mr. Williams was an interesting bit of history and remarkable as showing the clearest recollection of the events which transpired a half century ago. But very few of those on the stage of action of that time are now living, and it will be but a comparatively short time until all shall be sleeping beneath the sod."

The California Book Club once issued to members a series of twelve folders on seals. The series was written by Kenneth M. Johnson, who also did the research for it. It was edited by Oscar Lewis and John Hussey, and printed by Grant Dahlstrom at Castle Press, San Francisco.

The introduction folder relates that prior to the period of Mexican rule, if it may be said that California had a seal, it would have been the seal of Spain. The Mexican period commenced in 1822, and at first there were no particular seals for the territory. Soon, however, the seals shown in the folder came into use. Both were wood cuts, inked and then stamped on paper. By far the most common, according to history, was the Monterey Custom House seal, which was used to validate sealed papers. The source of these seals is unknown; possibly one or more may have been made in the United States, for there is record of a shipment of type from the

Boston Foundry which included a woodcut of a Mexican eagle.

During the proceedings of the 1850's in connection with the validation of the Mexican land grants, it was fairly well established that the Monterey Custom House seal had been counterfeited, or in any event there had been two woodcut versions of the same seal. What happened to the seals themselves is a matter of conjecture.

Each seal is described and a line drawing shown in eleven other folders sent out by the Book Club. The seal of the City of Monterey is No. 5 in the collection, which includes the seals of the State, the California Supreme Court, and the cities of Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Barbara, Stockton and Pasadena.

The Great Seal of the State of California had its origin in the Constitutional Convention in 1849. The details may be found in the "Report of the Debates in the Convention of California on the Formation of the State Constitution" by J. Ross Brown (Washington, D.C., 1850) held in Monterey's historic Colton Hall.