

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Carrying the Mail**

If there was one thing the Californians could do better than another, it was carrying them or not carrying them, that was a different matter.

According to Herbert Howe Bancroft in his "California Pastoral" written between 1769 and 1848, the Californians began to ride almost as soon as they could walk, and such children as were not killed in the beginning became expert riders.

A boy, as soon as he had the strength, would go out upon the hills, lasso a wild colt, halter and mount it, and then let it go flying over the open country until exhausted. If the colt fell in jumping a ditch, or rolled over in order to get rid of its burden the boy looked out to keep on top. Corrals were formed by driving poles into the ground; these were secured by ledges tied with thongs. The corral was about 200 varas in diameter.

Twice a week a courier was dispatched in either direction between the missions, starting from San Diego at one end and San Francisco at the other; letters and messages were thus conveyed from one point to another along the entire line, each mission contributing its quota and furnishing its share of horses and messengers. The courier was always a Spanish soldier, never an Indian.

Referring to delays of the couriers, Gutierrez, writing to the padres and officials in Monterey in February, 1836, ordered that mails leave Monterey on the seventh of the month at 8 p.m. The soldier carrying it is to be relieved by another at Santa Barbara, who is to be relieved at San Gabriel, by the soldier who takes the mail to San Diego.

Mails were ordered to leave San Diego on the 22nd of every month at 5 p.m. A house and vaquero, to attend to the soldier in case of accident, was to be kept ready; and the courier kept to time, according to an enclosed table of arrivals and departures at each halting place. The people were to be notified 24 hours before arrival, so as to have letters posted.

Above Monterey the service was particularly poor, according to history reports. Says General Vallejo, writing to the minister of war in 1841: "The administration of the post office in this department is an unknown thing; there is no regularly established mail

service. The mails are exposed to all who choose to tamper with them, and offenders have no fear of punishment."

In California in 1846 (California's first newspaper, published in Monterey), the editor thus laments: "It is a melancholy sight for a poor editor to look over the packages of eight weeks of his little paper, and see no subscribers and little encouragement to subscribers to be two months at a time without their papers."

In the spring of 1847 a new mail arrangement went into effect. The first arrival brought many letters and papers. Quartermasters at Military posts were the postmasters. Where there was no post, the alcalde took charge. The governor ordered that the citizens "be accommodated by the military, and their letters and papers sent free of expense."

This service was also performed on horseback by a party consisting of two soldiers, which started every Monday from San Diego and San Francisco, the parties meeting at Dana's rancho the next Sunday to exchange mails; starting back on their respective routes the next morning, and arriving back in San Diego and San Francisco the next Sunday. Thus Monterey received mail on Thursday evening.

Monterey celebrated the opening of the first post office in the city, when the 100th anniversary was observed as part of the Centennial program. The first postmaster, Captain William Marcy, arrived on the Schooner California from New York.