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EARLY ROADS AND STREETS OF SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

By Robert Angermeler

In the tranquil period before the electrifying news of the discovery of gold had plunged central California into a frantically disorganized flurry of activity, the early settlers in the few hamlets and scattered ranches of the San Joaquin County area were connected by only a few unimproved roads. These roads were used mainly by mounted travelers and pack animals, and only occasionally, in favorable weather, was a wagon and team coaxed along for a few careful miles. The many miners and merchants who flocked to this area with their tons of freight to be moved into the "Mother Lode", as well of the several newly founded stage-lines, found these primitive facilities, all of which traversed private property, completely inadequate for their needs.

In their efforts to travel from the head of navigation in Stockton to the gold fields, the teamsters were beset with problems which were to take years to resolve. The most persistent obstacles were the peculiar soil and the many creeks and gullies encountered. An area several miles wide, extending from Stockton to the foothills, consists of a very fine grained adobe soil, which seemed to these argonauts to take an almost diabolical delight in thwarting the efforts of floundering horses and frustrated, and undoubtedly, vocal teamsters. In the summer this adobe permitted itself to be ground into a fine powder which arose in smothering clouds, enveloping man and beast, and during the wet season would be reduced to a seemingly bottomless morass into which the heavily laden wagons would sink in up to their hubs. There are many old diaries and chronicles which tell us that wagons would be so badly mired that they would simply be abandoned for several months until dry weather permitted their removal. Even under favorable conditions, a trip across the county would often take several days. Many "Way Stations" were established to furnish lodgings, food, fodder and perhaps even a nip of a mild alcoholic beverage to settle the dust or to counteract the frost.

In these early years all of the roads radiated from Stockton like spokes on a wheel, and only gradually did the various cross roads appear. Evidently - the rural pioneers who did not happen to settle on an existing road were strictly on their own for many years.

A few of the roads - such as the French Camp Road - avoided the adobe soils by swinging to the south to take advantage of sandy soil. This is the main reason why it seems to wander with no apparent destination. Roads of this early period all became several hundred feet wide as the teamsters attempted to avoid badly rutted areas. This procedure was not accepted with much enthusiasm by

the farmers and ranchers over whose property these roads wandered. All roads eventually were located where the terrain was most suitable by virtue of being slightly elevated and reasonably free of dense stands of Oak trees and swales.

In the early 1850's, after the county had recovered somewhat from the initial turmoil caused by the gold rush, a great deal of thought and effort was given by governing bodies to road improvement. The Court of Sessions which was organized by Act of Legislature on April 11, 1850, created many of the roads and specified some of the conditions under which these roads were to be operated. The County Board of Supervisors was created by the State Legislature on March 20, 1855, and except for some overlap with the Court of Sessions for several years, was charged with the responsibility of conducting County business. Many "Order Declaring Public Highway" types of legislation were issued by both bodies, usually stating that these highways were to be 80, 100 or 150 feet wide, but neglecting to be specific as to exact locations, which evidently was acceptable at that time, but now, several generations later, is causing no end of bitterness and confusion.

These early roads were not paved, but with the more heavily traveled ones, at least, attempts were made to build them up so as to afford better drainage, which permitted their use during the entire year, except possibly during, or immediately after, a heavy rain storm.

During the hot, dry summer days, the water wagons which sprinkled the streets of the more important business districts to settle the persistent dust, were a delight to the "small fry" who risked a paddling for the joys of getting cooled off and for the added attraction of playing in the many mud puddles which defied the sun's drying power for an hour or two.

Early roads were mostly known by the names of the towns or areas which were their terminus. For example: Mokelumne Hill Road - Campo Seco Road - Mariposa Road - Lower Sacramento Road and Upper Sacramento Road (used in wet weather). After the mining camps and some of the many ferries declined in importance, many of the roads were renamed for newly developed towns such as Linden, Farmington, Escalon, Copperopolis and Waterloos Roads, as well as for prominent settlers who lived on them.

The ever increasing need for better roads is well exemplified by the following: (from Board of Supervisors files).

"To the Honorable Court of Sessions of San Joaquin County. Your Petitioners would respectfully represent that a County Road is much needed by the public from Staples Ferry on the Mok River to Stockton, that can be traveled during the rainy or winter season and would respectfully ask that viewers be appointed to locate said Road via Boody and Heath Rancho, Clapp O. Thomas and the Overhiser (?) ridge. Jan. 15, 1854."

(followed by thirty (30) signatures)

On March 31, 1854, the Honorable A. G. Stakes issued a decree verifying the necessity for such a road, appointed the Supervisor and elaborated on the route to be followed and in the last paragraph has this to say:

....."And it is farther ordered that a skull-tax for road purposed thereof of five (5) days labor is hereby assessed on all able bodied men between the ages of eighteen (18)

Commencing at the intersection formed by El Dorado Street and Commodore's Levee, and running thence along the northern line of said Levee, sixty feet in width, to the easterly line of Captain C. M. Weber's garden, on the south side of the Peninsula.

On March 15, 1888, the Board of Supervisors repealed the right to collect tolls and all public roads became free. During this era, (1880's and 1890's) road work was done by private contract, with the County and Cities establishing specifications for grading and graveling.

California had no macadamized (hard surfaced) roads until 1908. Our County was probably the first to start a program of surfacing by passing a \$1,890,000 highway bond issue in 1907.

The nucleus of a State system of highways was provided for by the Highway Act of 1909. Nothing much was done locally except the exchange of many letters with the California Highway Commission. The system of establishing for many years was for the State to take over certain County roads which were selected for their conformance with specifications for a State-wide network of top quality highways. It appears that the first State Highway was established in our County about 1930.

The Westward migration continues - and during the entire 120 year span of County growth the road system has always lagged slightly behind the demands of increasing traffic. The County maintains 1754 miles of roads (1968 data), but due to the accelerated demand most roads and major highways become obsolete before they are completed. This, perhaps, is also progress.

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SOCIETY NEWS

The annual dinner of San Joaquin County Historical Society will be on October 27 at Micke Grove.

The Conference of California Historical Societies will hold it's annual Northern California meeting at Weaverville, on Oct. 3, 4 and 5. It will hold it's annual workshop in San Joaquin County on Nov. 8 & 9. The sessions on Saturday, Nov. 8 will be at Pioneer Museum in Victory Park, Stockton, under the direction of Raymond Hillman, curator of history at Pioneer Museum. On Sunday, Nov. 9, sessions will be held in the Memorial Building at Micke Grove Park under the direction of Medora Johnson, Director of the San Joaquin County Historical Museum. All members are welcome to attend.

A committee from our society, Amy Boynton, Mabel Richey, and George Lahmeyer, made and arranged the table decorations for the Lodi Centennial Luncheon held on August 25th.

Dr. Howard Letcher was responsible for the fine exhibit in the Historical Society booth at the recent Lodi Grape Festival. It featured early railroads.

Medora Johnson has recently returned from a three week session of the American Association for State and Local History held in Utah. She was one of twenty people in the United States and Canada who received a full fellowship to attend the seminar program. We feel greatly honored that our Medora was chosen to represent California at the meeting.