

THE ALPINE SUN SHOPPER – September 6, 2007
Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society

150th ANNIVERSARY OF OVERLAND MAIL

Throughout the southwest and Alpine this fall, events have been scheduled to commemorate and memorialize the 1857 completion of the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line (SA&SD). The SA&SD was the first intercontinental communication link, joining the newly-won western territories with the Midwest and East Coast of the United States. The September 5, 1857, edition of *The San Diego Herald*, in reference to the mail line, stated: "...the most important event which has ever occurred in the annals of San Diego, and undoubtedly constitutes an epoch in the Pacific Coast of the Union, which will be recorded and remembered with just pride, long after the mails will have been transported on the great continental railroad, the first rail of which may be thus said to have been laid." And here we are—150 years later attesting to the validity of that quotation!

Passengers traveled from New Orleans to San Antonio by steamer, then on to San Diego. The overland trip took approximately 34 days. An early ad for the Overland Mail stated that the line is "...ticketing passengers through to San Diego and San Francisco and also to intermediate stops." Passengers were to be accommodated in new coaches drawn by six mules, "except the Colorado Desert of one hundred miles, which we cross on mule-back." The fare from New Orleans, via San Antonio to San Diego was \$190—a huge sum for the time! The ad further noted that "...an armed escort travels through Indian country with each mail train and provisions are provided during the trip; however, when stops are made at Public Houses along the line, each passenger will pay for his own meal." Personal baggage was limited to thirty pounds, not including blankets and arms. Extra baggage was billed at \$1 per pound for the trip to San Diego.

The SA&SD mail line passenger service reached Old Town by way of Warner's, Santa Ysabel and Santa Maria (now Ramona). Its arrival touched off a jubilant celebration in the plaza—amid shouts and cheers, bells were rung and anvils struck. San Franciscans, envious of the new route, called the mail line "The Jackass Mail," although horses and mules, rather than jackasses, were used.

Subsequent runs took a shortcut through Cockney Bill Williams' Viejas Rancho. Bill provided fresh mules and horses, feed and even meals for passengers. The mail line advanced funds to Cockney Bill for a Buffalo Pitts thresher and a one-horse flour mill. He became proprietor of one of the county's most productive and mechanized businesses—riding high! Later, Williams was sued by the line for settlement of debts, his prosperity behind him.

The Overland Mail certainly impacted the residents of Alpine. From Descanso, the route passed through what is now Wright's Field before it wound its way through the current Alpine Historical Society's museum site and proceeded down the hill to Los Coches and on to San Diego.

After three short years of operation, in 1860 the SA&SD Mail Line terminated operations in the county. The operation, though a boom to the area, was not profitable for the company. The Overland Mail's existence, however, will forever be remembered in San Diego County. In celebration of the anniversary, the Alpine Lion's Club has chosen the Overland Mail as the theme for the 2007 Viejas Day Parade which will be held on October 6th.

If you have stories to share about Alpine history, or need to know something about it, please e-mail or call me and I'll pass stories along and research questions.

Carol Walker and her husband Paul lived in Alpine for 19 years. Carol is the Membership Chairman of the Alpine Historical Society. She can be reached at cwalker@alpinehistory.org or 858-384-2546.