

## CARRETAS

Excerpts from an article written by Dan Krieger for the *Telegram-Tribune* - SCHS Archives 2013.002.020

Lack of timber made carreta-building a challenge.

Many visitors to towns and cities of the Central Coast remark on the relative absence of trees. Yet there are many more trees today than there were a hundred years ago. For the Spanish Padres and early rancheros, timber of sufficient size for building was usually more scarce than water.

**Juan Francisco Dana**, son of Captain William G. Dana recalled these timber-scarce days to author Marie Harrington in about 1930:

"Ten years ago before I was born the first ship ever to be built in California was constructed by Captain Dana, who at the time was courting my mother. In 1828 California was still such a new land that there was no sawmill or anything else much in the way of 'improvements.' Captain Dana decided, however, that he needed another schooner for his trade with the Sandwich Islands so he set about having one built.

"He selected a spot to the north of Santa Barbara, which to this day, is called Goleta from the fact that the ship was built near there.

"Lumber in its manufactured shape was almost unknown and Captain Dana had to send east for the frame lumber. But the Californios did make use of a sawing pit and he used this board lumber for the inside of the vessel.

"A sawing pit was a curious affair and today's lumber mills would be amazed at the crudity of their early forerunners. The pit was nothing more than a hole in the ground with a frame over the top of the hole.

"The sides of the frame kept the pit sides from falling in and also served as a rack upon which to place the logs. A log would be placed on the frame and ripped with a big saw into boards, with one man standing in the pit and the second man over it.

"Eventually the ship was finished after a great deal of expense. Special runways leading down to the shoreline were built and a day was set aside for the great launching.

"Don Julian Foxen, being an ex-seaman and a good friend of Capt. Dana, was given the honor of launching the ship. He wanted to make a really fine affair out of this so he sent out a call to all his compadres and cousins-by-marriage to bring some oxen to "help launch the ship."

"So on the appointed day, the Californios arrived like a swarm of bees. There were over 50 yoke of oxen to help out Don Julian! When all the "cousins" found out that Don Julian had put one over on them they probably had a good laugh among themselves but they all stayed for the launching. The vessel was finally pushed down the runway into the water, to the overjoyed shouts of all present. I have heard that story so often that I almost believe I was there although it was 10 years before I was born!

"Our family on the Nipomo was almost self-sufficient in making the necessities of ranch life but we did not make our carretas which were the chief mode of travel, outside of the horse. Our carretas

were always made by our friend, Don Jose Ortega, who lived on the huge Refugio Rancho many miles south of us on the way to Santa Barbara.

"Nuestra Senora del Refugio was the whole name of this rancho but we always called it just Refugio. Don Jose was an expert carreta-maker.

"Lumber was almost as scarce as it had been when my father had built La Fama. When we were growing up, we had to get our lumber from around Cambria which was at least 60 or 70 miles west of us. Don Jose had just as much trouble getting suitable lumber for the carretas as he had to send his men from his rancho up to the Santa Cruz Mountains, which were a spur of the San Rafael range about 20 miles beyond the Santa Ynez section. A few red cedars were up in this area and sawing pits were located there and all our board lengths, too, came from this area.

"It was hard to get lumber out of the mountain country as the trails were very rough and of course, roads did not exist. So the carretas that Don Jose made were very much prized.

"(Through much masterful wood working), the carretas (were made) without a single nail. We didn't have many nails in those days anyway. Our carretas were made low and wide to prevent their overturning on a steep hill. Besides transporting our women-folk, they were used for heavy work on the rancho. Our Indian servants would also use them for wood-gathering expeditions and the wood would not spill out even coming down a steep hill.

"These carretas were hitched to oxen by the pole to the yoke with rawhide thongs. Some of these old-time yokes can still be seen in mission museums and also at the Southwest Museum down in Los Angeles. They certainly did good service a century ago in California."

