

1-1-1959

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Recommended Citation

Macmillan, David S. and Brian Plomley. "An American Surveyor in Mexico, 1827-1860." *New Mexico Historical Review* 34, 1 (1959). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol34/iss1/2>

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NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

VOL. XXXIV

JANUARY, 1959

No. 1

AN AMERICAN SURVEYOR IN MEXICO, 1827-1860*

By DAVID S. MACMILLAN AND BRIAN PLOMLEY

IN 1956 a quantity of manuscript material in the possession of the Birkbeck family in Queensland, Australia, was brought to the notice of Australian historians. Among the more interesting items was a diary and a commonplace book in which the diary entries were continued. Together the books covered the period from 1827 to 1860 in which Samuel Bradford Birkbeck was engaged in the silver-mining industry in Mexico, as surveyor, manager and director for various British companies, and, latterly, on his own account.

Birkbeck, a young surveyor from the Illinois, set out for Vera Cruz in 1826. His father, Morris Birkbeck, a Quaker enthusiast for social and economic improvement, had settled in Illinois in 1817 after emigrating from England. Morris Birkbeck's books "Notes on a Journey in America" (1817) and "Letters from Illinois" (1818), both published in London, ran into several editions, and helped to stimulate emigration to the United States.¹ In the course of the Nineteenth Century several members of the English branch of the family played leading parts in educational and social reform. The Birkbecks were a talented and progressive family in the Quaker tradition.

Young Samuel Bradford Birkbeck and his brother, Charles, appear to have been attracted by the good prospects

* Based on the Diaries and Commonplace Book of Samuel Bradford Birkbeck. The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

1. Morris Birkbeck's writings after he settled in Illinois, included his "Address to British Emigrants arriving in the Eastern ports with a reply to William Cobbett, Esq." published in New York, 1819, and "An Appeal to the People of Illinois on the question of a Convention," published in Shawneetown, 1823. Copies of these rare publications are in the Birkbeck Collection.

offered in the Mexican silver mining boom of the 1820's. Odd letters inserted into the commonplace book suggest that they were corresponding with friends in Mexico before they left the Illinois. The journey from Vera Cruz to Mexico City lasted three weeks and Samuel Birkbeck's diary for the period, penned in miniscule on forty closely-written pages, gives a fascinating account of the difficulties of the journey, and an interesting picture of Mexico in that year of internal disturbance, unrest and depression. Vera Cruz made a poor impression on Birkbeck—"The streets are narrow and dirty with rotten vegetables and dead animals in every direction and Turkey Buzzards as tame as chickens contending with the innumerable dogs over the carcasses. The fine sea breeze is not felt being excluded by the high walls that front the town. The air appears to be of a very corroding nature, the iron bannisters etc. are entirely decayed . . . the large cannons that answer for posts in the streets are wasted nearly all away."²

The poorness of the lodgings available made the brothers anxious to leave the city but there was much difficulty over the exchanging of currencies and the hiring of the necessary mules and muleteers. Yellow fever was raging in Vera Cruz, and before they could leave for the interior, they were asked to attend the funeral of "a poor American who had died of it. The procession gave rise to some ugly incidents—We were accosted by the populace with the names of Jews and heretics. The service was read and, after cutting and destroying the velvet that surrounded the coffin, that the native onlookers might not be tempted to raise it for plunder, we lowered him into the ground."³

The only attractive feature of the town was its women, with their "fine silk stockings, beautifully worked, and little tight shoes that scarcely cover the toes, a shawl thrown over the head in which is stuck a very high comb, giving a peculiar appearance, that is not unbecoming."⁴ These Mexican charms, however, failed to keep the brothers in Vera Cruz.

2. Samuel Birkbeck's Mexican Diary, p. 2.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

4. *Ibid.*

On leaving the town with a string of 40 mules, the Birkbecks were soon aware of the primitive living conditions and the poverty of Mexico. Throughout their three-weeks journey they found the people hospitable, but able to offer little but "fish floating in grease, black beans and tortillas." On the way, Birkbeck noted numerous details of the dress, buildings, and modes of travel of the people. The extremely poor quality of the livestock impressed him strongly, as did the dangerous and difficult roads and mountain traverses. Only an occasional good bridge, invariably built, as he noted, under Spanish rule, earned favourable comment. Numbers of ruinous haciendas are referred to in the Diary, with decayed establishments for the refining of sugar and broken-down mills. The general impression was of a dismal country whose prosperity had grievously declined.

At the town of Cordova their arrival caused public excitement. Apparently Americans were rare in this part of the country and Birkbeck noted that while they ate in the principal "Mezon," "half the town gazed on to see if 'Los Ingleses' eat like Christians."

As the party moved west, entries were made in the Diary on the tobacco plantations, the strict monopoly applied to the product, the Mexican sugar industry, and on the poor quality of the primitive ploughs and other agricultural implements in use. Birkbeck was a perceptive and practical-minded observer. He was surprised that coyotes should abound in areas of even extensive cultivation, and the native methods of ploughing struck him as wasteful of energy and of oxen. As they neared Central Mexico the country improved greatly. The grain crops and better stock of the great haciendas indicated a more hopeful future for the Birkbecks, and the administrators of haciendas and the major domos of out-stations made the party very welcome. With typical shrewd practicality Samuel Birkbeck questioned and noted, and the diary contains details of the stock carried, the crops produced and the profits made by several haciendas. In several of the villages through which they passed a judicious show of firearms was found necessary to keep off crowds of rough appearance "who

threw stones at us, calling us Jews and Spaniards." Soon they were journeying with arms at the ready "dreading an attack in the hollows through which we had to pass, for the neighbourhood has a bad character, and I have no doubt that the place deserves its notoriety from the great number of crosses we saw by the roadside which it is the custom to erect wherever a murder has been committed."⁵

Large mule trains, consisting of as many as 500 animals began to be encountered, obviously travelling together for safety, and the party soon came in sight of the Popocatepetl. Birkbeck noted that many of the haciendas were local industrial centres, many specialising in the production of pulque. He was disappointed when the valley of Mexico at last came into view.

"After the luxuriant description given of it by the Baron Humboldt and other travellers, nothing can be more disappointing when everything is parched by the dry season . . . an unwholesome-looking shallow pond stretches for miles, with a few miserable villages with specimens of the leperos of Mexico as they call that race of ragged blackguards which infests the metropolis, who appear to have no way of gaining their living but robbery—these free and independent Republicans are great men and look down upon these poor Indians with much contempt. They have swayed the legislature to pass laws contrary to the wishes of the more decent part of the community."⁶

Here, after only a few weeks in the country, Birkbeck was stating his dissatisfaction with the Mexican political system—a sentiment which was to become increasingly strong in him during his long residence in the country.

Birkbeck's account of Mexico City, its architecture, social life, living and working conditions, commerce, its foods and entertainments written at some length, makes entertaining reading. But of more unusual interest is his account in the Diary of journeys to Real del Monte and Toluca in connection with silver-mining, where he examined lands which were for sale, having been confiscated by the Government. Entertain-

5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

ing at first the idea of purchasing a small estate, Birkbeck changed his mind, enumerating the many difficulties and problems entailed in land-ownership in this unsettled country. The distilling of whisky was another project that Birkbeck considered and further trips are recorded in the Diary in this connection.

In the course of these journeys Birkbeck encountered several owners of haciendas who were considering leaving the country, such as the "Old Biscayan who, being frightened of the outcry against Spaniards, was returning to Europe after a residence in this country of more than twenty years."⁷ Birkbeck sympathised with such Spaniards, and stated that he considered their treatment unjust, since in many cases they had helped to effect the Revolution. Clearly, he considered that many of the allegations of disloyalty to the new regime made against them were based on personal spite and jealousy.

In the Tierra Caliente district he noted that the Spanish landowners, like his "old Biscayan," had to suffer "insults and the destruction of their property, while the rancheros insult them whenever they go abroad and the authorities deprive them of the privilege of carrying pistols, taking away their only means of defence."⁸ To a man of Birkbeck's upbringing, the injustice was patent and intolerable.

By far the most interesting and informative Mexican item in the collection is the large commonplace book in which Birkbeck assiduously recorded his important business activities, his impressions of Mexico, and in addition, a great mass of detailed information about Mexican trade, industries and agriculture. The silver-mining companies which he served in the 1830's and 1840's were prepared to undertake investments in haciendas and the commonplace book contains over fifty full accounts of haciendas in the years 1836-1840. In many cases Birkbeck noted the brand marks under the names of the haciendas. The nature of the information recorded in the book indicates that Birkbeck was reporting on the estates for the British Companies which he served. The Interest Acts of the early 1830's had encouraged British investment abroad

7. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

8. Samuel Birkbeck's *Commonplace Book*, 1836, p. 53.

and Mexico, like the United States, was a promising field. As an example of this aspect of Birkbeck's work there is his report of October, 1836, on the haciendas of the Marques de Taral.

The Marques, besides the haciendas of Avastudero etc. has those of San Matea and Juan Perez etc. forming the "Condado" and containing about 500 sitios. The marquesado of which the Cohecera is the Taral extends north as far as Sierra Hermosa. Those of the condado are under the charge of Don Antonio Garcia. The marquesado is managed by the Marquis and his sons. The quantity of sheep in all these haciendas is 900,000 and, cattle 100,000 head besides a great quantity of horses. A dry year is immensely destructive to the sheep from scarcity of pasture. . . . In the year 1828 the estates lost above 100,000. I recommended to Don Antonio the introduction of white clover to avoid this disaster as it does not require cultivation for sowing and spreads faster and stands drought better than any plant I know. He has commissioned me to obtain some for him from New York. . . . The sheep are of the coarsest kind and produce rather hair than good wool and scarcely any attention has been paid to better the breed. A few good merinos were lately obtained by the State Government and thrived very well, but after the revolution of 11th May of last year, Santana and Barragar seized them as booty.⁹

On these estates, Birkbeck suggested the establishment of a "horse sawmill" and the progressive Don Antonio requested him to prepare a plan. This "Administrador" impressed the American greatly with his improvements, "carried out notwithstanding the prejudice and ignorance of his servants." Innovations included "Scotch ploughs and an imperfect and clumsy imitation of the American winnowing machine for maize." Information on the profits, situation and prospects of the Marques's lands was also recorded.

The hacienda reports are a mine of information on the Mexican country life of the period, but after 1838 Birkbeck was preoccupied with his main interest—silver mining. The Commonplace book contains several hundreds of detailed reports on silver mines. Many of these were ancient, no longer worked, and Birkbeck was commissioned to report on the

9. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

possibility of working them profitably with the new crushing machinery and extracting processes that were being evolved in Europe and in the United States. By this time he had made his home at Zacatecas in the province of Atecas, Central Mexico, and had married Damiana Valdez, a young Mexican woman of good family. Against a background of constant political unrest in the 1840's and 1850's he carried on silver mining operations, often at considerable risk to his life and property. Federalists and centralists kept Central Mexico in a ferment of plots, risings and repressions, and Birkbeck, despite his desire to remain aloof, was inevitably involved in the troubles. The *Commonplace Book* shows that he kept closely in touch with scientific developments, and new chemical methods of processing ores were tried out in the mines which he controlled, often with very good results. The walls of ancient workings were found very productive, and he prospered, but difficulties with the authorities of the Mexican Mint caused him much worry.

One of the most interesting features of the *commonplace book* is Birkbeck's lengthy description of the silver mining industry as operated in Mexico in the 1840's. It lists the thirty different strictly defined grades of workmen employed, from the "Parados a la corriga" through the "paleros" or timbermen, "polvereros" or powdermen, "arreadores" or horse drivers to the "capitanes" or examiners of the ore, giving details of their pay, duties, perquisites and position in the hierarchy.¹⁰

Other interesting accounts are written up in detail, of Mexican irrigation, gold-mining, customs duties and viculture.

By the late 1850's Birkbeck was becoming increasingly worried by the prospect of his sons, now approaching military age, being conscripted into the Mexican Army. He had now nine children and the continual political upheavals made him anxious to leave the country. Selling up his mining interests at considerable loss, he left Mexico in 1860, sailing for Australia where a branch of the family had settled. He died in 1867 while his sons were establishing a pastoral property at

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-74.

Glenmore in Queensland, which his descendants still hold. His thirty three years in Mexico had not, perhaps, justified his youthful hopes of prosperity, but in his diaries, journals and other manuscripts we have informative glimpses of an economic progress made with difficulty and danger in a time of violent unrest in the Mexican Republic.