

# 1961: Pioneer's letters shed some light on early years in Santa Cruz

*History 12-30*  
**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into the archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories from the past. The following column, titled "Pioneer resident's letters tell of early Santa Cruz," was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on August 29, 1961. It was written by columnist Wally Trabing.

**By WALLY TRABING**  
SENTINEL COLUMNIST

A stack of letters written by one of the first white men to live in Santa Cruz, was loaned to The Sentinel this week by the Wells Fargo Bank American Trust company in San Francisco.

The writer's name was Josiah Belden.

He is also listed among the first 151 residents of Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) in 1846.

Belden came across the plains to California in 1841 with the General Bidwell party. It is said to be the second emigrant party to cross the Sierras into Mexican territory. His original home was Middleton, Conn.

His first letters back home (the originals of which are in the Western American museum at Yale University) were written in Monterey after a six-month journey.

Although apparently free of Indian attacks, the party did lose their way in the Sierras.

"We frequently fell in with large parties of Indians and were in expectation of being attacked by them, but I suppose they saw we were well prepared for them and thought it best to let us alone," he wrote.

Indian guides were hired to take them across the Sierras, but "the scoundrels led us into the very worst part of the mountains and then ran away into the night — we were in an unknown wilderness surrounded by mountains on every side rising to an immense height and covered with snow."

His letter written to his sister, back in "the United States of America," continued with the explanation of how they had to abandon their wagons and belongings and continue on their horses with some cattle.

"We finally had to kill some of our horses and eat them as we had nothing else to eat except acorns for about two weeks," he said.

Finally the party reached the California plains, and at the first town were arrested by the Mexicans because they didn't have passports. In six days they were set free and Belden and a few others made their way to Monterey. He got a job as a store clerk. A letter said:

"This is a fine country and most delightful health climate. It is hardly ever cold enough here to make a fire necessary for comfort. I like the country better than the Spanish people who live here, for many of them are great rogues — for they stole four horses from myself and my friend at the town where we were."

In 1842 Belden wrote to his sisters from Santa Cruz where he came to start a business of his own (store). He writes in part:

# 1961

Continued from Page A9

"This place is on the north side of Monterey Bay close by the Pacific ocean and about 20 miles across from Monterey. It can hardly be called a town or even a village, there is so little of it.

"It has formerly been a Roman Catholic missionary establishment for civilizing the wild Indians and has once been very flourishing but it is now broken up and is fast going to decay — though there is still some trade here amongst the few Indians that remain, and the farmers and others that are here.

"There is only one foreigner in the place besides myself, though there are a few others living around within a few miles of here.

"I was a good deal puzzled when I first came by having to do business with people who spoke a language that I knew nothing about, but I have now got so I can jabber Spanish pretty smartly.

"I don't know but what they will make a Catholic of me before I go away, as I have my store alongside the church and am boarding with the Catholic priest.

"I think the old fellow knows my opinions most too well to try to convert me. He is a clever jolly old fellow who is fond of his glass, his cards and his jokes as any man.

"The people here are generally pretty clever to a man's face though most of them would not hesitate to rob him the minute his back is turned.

"I have managed to get along pretty well with them so far and shall try to continue to do so, notwithstanding they are great rogues.

"As to their hospitality, I suppose you will think they have rather an awkward way of showing it when I tell you that even a person who is travelling has to carry his blanket with him and when he stops at a farmer's house at night, as he has to do, he must just spread his blanket on the floor, roll himself upon it and take the best nap he can.

"When the supper is ready the

family sit by the fire on some wooden blocks or something else and each one receives his plate of victuals. As they are poor they generally eat with their fingers.

"However, such is the custom of the country and it seems to be done with a good will: I have pretty fine times here as I have not much to do and a horse to ride about whenever I wish, and as beautiful a country to ride over as the sun ever shone upon.

"Besides I have plenty of lively, bright-eyed Spanish girls to chat with so that one way with another I enjoy myself tolerable well."

Belden went broke during a minor revolution between the Californians and the Mexicans. He did receive \$50 for leading a small force of four Americans to protect the governor's wife from the Californians.

He made only enough money to exist. But he wrote that he became a naturalized citizen of the country so that he could obtain a 21,000-acre government land grant on the Sacramento river, about 300 miles from Monterey. The land cost him \$100 and he said it was some of the best land in the country.

This may have been when his fortunes turned. A 1930 newspaper story tells of Belden's rise to eventually becoming a multimillionaire. He bought property in San Jose on which the old Hotel Vendome was eventually located and he became mayor of San Jose in 1850.

He also purchased land in San Francisco along a thoroughfare now known as Market Street. It has about a 700 foot frontage on Market and he paid about \$50 a foot, according to a news account. He sold some of it to Charles Crocker.

Belden's home in San Jose became the social center of the area where gay weekly parties were described.

He was well settled in Santa Cruz before the ill-fated Donner party broke through to California.

Later Belden, now married, went to New York, according to the news accounts and made his millions in the banking business.