

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

VOL. II. NO. 13

SAN DIEGO, ALTA CALIFORNIA, DECEMBER 5, 2008

PRICE: FREE

Who Was Albert Lewis Seeley ?

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Like many San Diegans, Albert Seeley came from somewhere else. Born in the rural farm belt of Illinois in 1822, he had been a stage driver since the age of 17, working in Texas and then Los Angeles.

Seeley arrived in Old Town with his English-born wife Emily and their children in 1867. At 5' 10½", he was considered a large, fine-looking man. He also was a superb horseman and stage driver, and was shortly awarded a government contract to carry mail and passengers between Los Angeles and San Diego.

The United States Mail Stage Line initially operated out of the Franklin House located on the south side of the plaza. The new operation under Seeley and his partner Charles Wright faced multiple difficulties. The mail never arrived on time (three times weekly) be-

cause of poor road conditions, especially during winter when rainstorms washed out entire sections of the coastal route to San Juan Capistrano. River crossings were particularly dangerous, and holdups, although infrequent, did occur.

In early 1869, Seeley was appointed road master. He spent months improving the coastal route, further delaying mail deliveries and triggering negative press coverage from the *San Diego Union*. It was a difficult time for the man from Illinois.

In May, he purchased Bandini's family home and adjoining lots for \$2,000; most likely with Emily's recent inheritance of \$8,000. It was a wise investment because the property provided Seeley with an opportunity to build the necessary facilities for his stage operation and to house his passengers. Within a month, he had hired Henry F. and Samuel H. Parsons to renovate the deteriorating adobe and to add a wood-framed second story and balconies.

By 1871, Seeley had built a large barn for his coaches and mud wagons, bought the Blackhawk

Livery Stable, and put up corral fencing and a windmill for pumping water from a well. Over the next year, he erected another windmill, rebuilt or replaced several sheds, and planted eucalyptus trees along Juan Street as a windbreaker. As of 1873-1874, the one-time Texas stagehand owned five wagons and other vehicles valued at \$1,000; 16 horses and half-breeds at \$800, and harnesses, ropes, and bridles at \$200. The hotel lot was valued at \$2,000 in terms of improvements.

The stage master loved fanfare and exaggeration. In 1874, he purchased the largest and most splendid stagecoach in the entire county, and before putting it into service, gave everyone in Old Town as free ride. His advertisements boasted that his Los Angeles-San Diego stages passed through "the best part of Southern California."

On August 7, 1898, the "court-teous commander," as the historian Hubert Howe Bancroft once called him, passed away in Santa Rosa CA. He and Emily are interned at Olivet Cemetery in Colma near San Francisco.

