

The McKellar 1891 Triply Redirected Cover: Uncovering a Unique Mexico–New Zealand–California Family Story

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Why is this cover so special?



Figure 1. Miss McKellar's letter.

The McKellar cover (Figure 1) is considered one the “jewels” of Mexico’s 1886–1895 Large Numeral issue.¹ This rare maritime cover bears New Zealand stamps and two separate sets of Mexican Numerals (one 5c and then a 1c + two 2c) used for reposting (not for postage due) on two separate occasions. Amazingly, this cover is not a philatelic fabrication. Additional research has shown that, besides being a treasure in itself, the cover has a fascinating history behind it involving New Zealanders settling in frontier Mexico, the death of a child enroute, a callous assassination for hire and even a connection with Black Seminole Indians, ex-slaves who had fled the United States before the Civil War to form a free community in Mexico.

A meandering and convoluted route

The route this cover served was indeed unusual. It was redirected three times trying to reach Miss McKellar as she moved from one place to another on a tragic fam-

ily’s journey. Figure 2 shows a map of its four-legged trip.

- 1) Dunedin, New Zealand. March 25, 1891
- 2) San Francisco, California, April 17
- 3) Paso del Norte (now Cd. Juárez), Mexico April 21
- 4) Torreón, Mexico, April 22
- 5) Then, reached Nacimiento Hacienda, Mexico

2nd trip – reposting to Las Vegas, New Mexico; Mexico single 5c postage

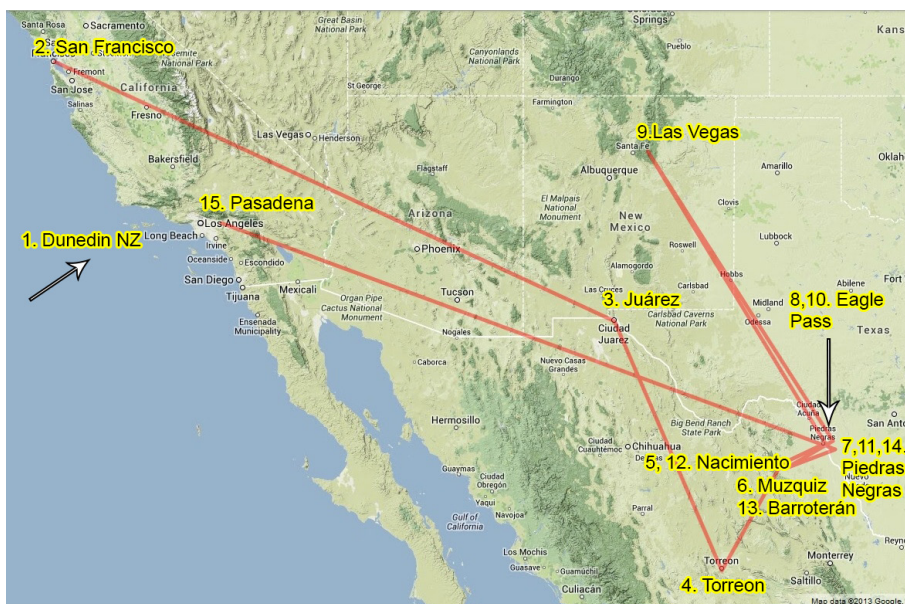


Figure 2. Route taken by McKellar's letter.

added

6) Coahuila (probably Múzquiz) cancel on 5c blue

7) Piedras Negras, April 28

8) Eagle Pass, Texas, April 28

9) Las Vegas, New Mexico, May 1

3rd trip –forwarding back to Nacimiento Ranch, Mexico with address label

10) Eagle Pass, May 25

11) Piedras Negras, May 26

12) Then, reached Nacimieto Hacienda, Mexico (for the second time)

4th trip – second reposting to Pasadena, California; Mexico 1c + two 2c

postage added

13) Barroterán

14) Piedras Negras, May 30

15) Pasadena, California June 2

The rates

The cover originated in Dunedin, New Zealand, on March 25, 1891, franked with nine pence postage (two pairs Scott 62 and 68). It remains a mystery why this cover was franked that way when one shilling (12 pence) apparently was New Zealand's rate at the time for a letter under a half ounce to Mexico via San Francisco.² The postage on the two Mexican forwarding legs was both 5c for 15 grams to the US.³ These two were treated as new mailings paying the regular rates, probably because they went briefly out of the mail system when delivered in the Nacimiento Hacienda. The tape at the back edge of the cover hints that the cover was indeed opened and resealed before re-entering the Mexican postal system. The United States forwarding back to



Figure 3. David Harkness McKellar

Mexico was treated as a postal return to origin, therefore paying no US postage as indicated by the stamp “forwarded.”

The McKellar family: New Zealand

To understand the circumstances of this letter, we need to start in Scotland. David Harkness McKellar was born in Achahuish, Argyllshire, Scotland, on July 28, 1829.⁴ (See Figure 3) In 1848, his eldest brother emigrated to Australia where he acquired large sheep ranches. In 1854, David followed his brother to Australia, but soon thereafter moved to New Zealand. In 1858 David married Jane Catherine Skene, whom he had met in Australia, and over the next 35 or so years, he raised sheep in New Zealand and traveled to New Mexico and Mexico, acquiring interests in property. By 1877, he owned the Brooksdale estate near Tapanui, New Zealand, consisting of 15,280 acres bordering the Blue Mountains, used for sheep ranching. There he built a house resembling “an English country manor,” surrounded by gardens and “a lake stocked with trout and adorned by swans.”⁵

The Mexico connection: Hacienda del Nacimiento and the Black Seminole Indians

In 1881, McKellar purchased Hacienda del Nacimiento (“Nacimiento Ranch”), a massive property of 247,195 acres in the Mexican state of Coahuila, 115 miles southwest of Eagle Pass, Texas, on which there were a number of separate ranches. Nacimiento, Spanish for “source,” refers to the springs on the property that form the source of the Sabinas River. The nearest small town to Nacimiento was Santa Rosa, which officially had changed its name to Melchor Múzquiz, after the Santa Rosa general who had served as interim President of Mexico briefly in 1832.

In 1850, a group of “Black Seminole Indians” consisting of freedmen and runaway slaves from Florida who had allied themselves with Seminole Indians, formed a settlement in Nacimient near a Kickapoo Indian village. The settlement, known as Nacimiento de los Negros (Nacimiento of the Blacks), still exists today with a population of about 500 and has been the subject of a number of academic studies,

a documentary film, and several youtube videos.⁶ In Mexico, the Black Seminoles today are known as “los Mascogos” and their village as Nacimiento de la Tribu Mascogos.



Figure 4. Las Rucias Residence

McKellar’s plan was to form a Scottish settlement at Nacimiento and profit through ranching and development of the property. He traveled extensively between New Zealand, Mexico City and London to obtain loans to support his properties. These properties included an investment in the Beck Grant near Las Vegas, New Mexico, another vast property of 2,500 square miles.

McKellar became overextended, however, and lost Brooksdale to the bank, after which he and his wife, with their son and six daughters (Florence Jane Catherine, Rachel Louise, Margaret Maud, Anne Edith, Jean Robertson, Vida Evelyn and David Skene) left for Nacimient in 1891.

The McKellars lived at “Las Rucias,” one of several ranches on the Nacimiento property, from June 1891 to the fall of 1893. (See Figure 4.) Their daily life was described in a diary kept by Margaret Maud McKellar, one of the daughters.⁷ The ranch provided employment for local “vaqueros” (cowboys) and cooks from Nacimiento de los Negros, the interactions between the McKellars and the locals being described in detail in Maud’s book.

The Pasadena connection: The tragic death of a daughter



Figure 5. R.M.S. *Monowai*.

With this as background, we now can see precisely where the cover fits into events in the lives of the McKellars. On March 21, 1891, the McKellar family was in Sydney, Australia and boarded the R.M.S. *Monowai*, a steamer making regular runs across the Pacific, bound for San Francisco. (See Figure 5.) The *Monowai* stopped in Auckland, New Zealand, on March 28, where it took on cargo, mail and passengers and departed that same day for San Francisco.⁸ The *Monowai* stopped in Hawaii, ultimately arriving at San Francisco on April 17.⁹ Rachel Louise, the second-oldest daughter, had fallen ill before the journey and, after arriving, the family, who were on their way south to Mexico, stopped and “took a home in Pasadena for a few months, expecting her to recover with rest and the benign climate.” Rachel’s condition, however, worsened. Her father, who had gone ahead to Mexico, “was notified of her serious condition, but the telegram mistakenly stated she was better rather than worse. McKellar delayed his trip to join his family, arriving two days too late to see his daughter alive.” She had died on June 14, 1891, and was buried in Pasadena.¹⁰ The “family continued their sad journey into Mexico,” traveling by train to Sabinas, Coahuila, and arriving at their ranch later that month.

Double-routing to Nacimiento Hacienda

The letter was posted in Dunedin, New Zealand (South Island), on March 25, 1891, addressed to one of the six McKellar daughters. The letter was originally addressed to Nacimiento, where the sender expected the family to be. The letter reached Auckland (on the North Island) by March 28, where it was put on the *Monowai*, coincidentally the same steamer on which the McKellars were then traveling and, unbeknownst to them, made the journey across the Pacific with them. We know this because the letter arrived in San Francisco on April 17, the same day as the *Monowai*, the only steamer from New Zealand to arrive that week.¹¹

The letter made its way through Paso del Norte (Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso) and on to Nacimiento by about April 23. Maud tells us that “a boy was sent in [to Múzquiz] every day for the mail”¹² and the letter apparently reached the ranch. Someone there readdressed it to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where McKellar’s sister and her husband owned a ranch, presumably because the sender understood they would travel there first. The cover was likely sent from the nearby post office of Múzquiz being charged the reduced rate from Mexico to the United States of five centavos, paid with a blue 5c Mexico Numeral.

Clearly, when the letter arrived in Las Vegas on May 1, no one there had been informed that the family was nursing Rachel Louise in Pasadena, and they sent the letter back to Nacimiento Ranch using a sticker that replicated the same address originally on the cover. At this time a "FORWARDED" mark apparently was added but no additional postage was charged. This was because the Mexican stamps had already paid the postage, and forwarding back did not require extra postage as the cover was still in the postal system. When the cover arrived at the ranch for the second time around the end of May, it may have been opened (the bottom edge is taped). It was read-dressed to Pasadena (possibly by David McKellar himself), and reposted, this time with three stamps totaling five centavos. The letter presumably reached Miss McKellar on June 2, twelve days before Rachel died.

Tragedy strikes again: a horrific murder in 1892

A year after losing the daughter, another tragedy happened to this family. McKellar began to fence in the ranch, which angered a local rancher who had been used to letting his cattle freely graze on the property. Late in the evening of July 29, 1892, when McKellar was returning from Santa Rosa on horseback, he was ambushed and shot dead. Suspicion immediately focused on rancher Adolfo Villareal, who was eventually convicted of hiring an assassin to kill McKellar for 300 pesos (of which he paid only five). Villareal was initially sentenced to 20 years imprisonment, then to death, before being resentenced to 20 years again when Mexico abolished capital punishment.¹³ Mrs. McKellar and her children remained on the ranch until a catastrophic drought caused them to leave in the fall of 1893. They relocated to the Piedrosa Cañon ranch near Las Vegas, New Mexico, owned by David McKellar's sister and her husband, Joseph Matt.

Epilogue: The McKellars after 1893

This battered little envelope is a rare survivor of a fascinating series of events in the late nineteenth century, ranging from New Zealand to Pasadena to the remote hacienda in Nacimiento, Mexico, that includes the bravery of an enterprising Scottish family in the frontier of remote Mexico and two terrible family tragedies. Although we can fill in much of its history, thanks to Maud McKellar's diary and the great resources of the internet, mysteries still remain: which of the McKellar daughters was the letter sent to, who sent it and what did it contain? What if the letter was meant for Rachel Louise and got to her hands 12 days before she died?

Perhaps these mysteries will be solved some day. We do know more about the McKellars, however. After three years in New Mexico, Mrs. McKellar sold Nacimiento, later living on a ranch in Nebraska near the Iowa border. In 1902 she moved to San Antonio, Texas, eventually settling with her three unmarried daughters in Flat Rock, North Carolina. Her son, David, ranched in Mexico but ultimately settled in Palestine, Texas, and Florence moved to Montreal and later Colorado. The McKellars typically lived long lives. Vida Evelyn, for example, reached 100 years. In 1909 Mrs. McKellar reacquired a part of the Mariposa ranch, originally part of Nacimiento, which was operated as the Mariposa Ranch Company. She died in 1923 and was buried in Pasadena. The Mariposa Ranch was ultimately sold by a grandson of David McKellar in the early 1960s.¹⁴ The archives of that ranch, including material relating to the early days of the McKellars in Mexico, are preserved today at Texas A&M University in College

Station.¹⁵

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End Notes

¹ Omar J. Rodriguez, "The Large Numeral Stamps of Mexico 1886-1895, A Great Challenge for the Classic Collector Easily Affordable for the Novice," *Mexicana*, January 2012, p. 33.

² "Postal Rates," *Bruce Herald*, Vol. XVIII, no. 1901, October 21, 1887, p. 4, digitized on <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz> (visited June 1, 2013). New Zealand did not join the UPU until October 1, 1891.

³ *Guía Postal de Los Estados-Unidos Mexicanos* (Mexico City: Francisco Diaz de Leon 1886), p. 103; A.K. Coney & Jose F. Godoy, *The Legal and Mercantile Handbook of Mexico* (Chicago & San Francisco: Pan American Publishing Co., 1892), p. 497 (both available on Google Books).

⁴ *The Harkness Family Genealogy*, on line at http://mck9web.com/gen/mckellar_d.html (visited March 9, 2013).

⁵ Margaret Maud McKellar, *Life on a Mexican Rancho* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1994), p. 11

⁶ Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996); De Florida a Coahuila (From Florida to Coahuila).

<http://www.lasamericafilms.org/component/zoo/item/de-florida-a-coahuila-from-florida-to-coahuila> (visited Mar. 10, 2013); Tribu Mascogos de Coahuila, on line at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2m-n58g-Jc> (part 1), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLu5f5DTrRw> (part 2) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcoaZ7r7Cs0> (part 3) (visited Mar. 10, 2013).

⁷ She serialized her diary in chapter form in a New Zealand newspaper beginning in 1898. Nearly 100 years later, Maud's work was republished by Lehigh University Press and is the source of much of the information in this paper.

⁸ *Auckland Star*, Vol. XXII, no. 73, March 28, 1891, p. 4 (noting arrival of Mr., Mrs. and Master McKellar – the girls were not mentioned – "for San Francisco") on line at <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz> (visited March 9, 2013).

⁹ *San Francisco Call*, Vol. 69, no. 139, April 18, 1891, p. 5, on line at: <http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cdnc> (visited Mar. 9, 2013).

¹⁰ McKellar, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ Searches on <http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cdnc>. The other New Zealand steamships then operating mail service to San Francisco were the Mariposa, the Alameda and the Mararoa. See "Shipping Overseas and the Coastal Service/the San Francisco Service," in *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, on line at <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/shipping-overseas-and-coastal-lines/page-5> (visited March 9, 2013).

¹² McKellar, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹³ *The Two Republics* (Mexico City) August 3, 8, 10, 20, 1892 & May 12, June 9, 1893, April 24, 1894; *The Mexican Herald* (Mexico City), March 24, July 21, 1897, all digitized on <http://www.hndm.unam.mx/> (visited March 10, 2013).

¹⁴ See Epilogue to *Life on a Mexican Rancho*, supra, pp. 217-222, for more details.

¹⁵ Inventory of the Mariposa Ranch Papers, 1890-1962, on line at <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/tamucush/00082/tamu-00082.html> (visited March 11, 2013).