

# NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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## SAINT CATHERINE'S CONVENT OF MONTEREY

by Amelie Elkinton

Tales of old Monterey, fact and fiction, have been written and rewritten, sometimes so elaborated that the original kernel of truth is almost completely lost. Even some old photographs have been mislabeled as being some structure they are not. An example of this confusion is the number of articles and photographs about the convent in Monterey that was occupied in the early 1850s by the Dominican sisters and their pupils. For example, a newsscrap from a San Francisco paper of about 1892 shows a sketch labeled "Ruin of the Convent." Excerpts from the text state:

On all the corners of the roof and on the apex of all the towers were wooden crosses painted white, and in the highest tower of all was a chime of bells which

rang for prayers morning and evening ... It gave shelter to thirty nuns and to over one hundred young Catholic girls, many of whom came from the surrounding country. The monks resided in two small houses on the hillside ... etc.

Our first reaction to this article was to put it aside with other legends for two reasons. First, we knew from Church authorities that never were there "thirty nuns" or "over one hundred young Catholic girls" in the convent in Monterey. Second, existing photographs of the convent were often confused with the adjoining structure, and in the views we had seen of both structures there were no "towers" or "crosses." Miss Evelyn McCormick, painter of the old adobes of Monterey during the first part of this century, told us that when she painted the convent she had to work from an old postcard which showed the building without ornamentation, as the structure was down when she came here to paint. We put the clipping away with the photographs and bided our time.

Last December (1983) we spent a few days in Los Angeles visiting history photograph collections there. At the Los Angeles Public Library a large folder of Monterey photographs was laid before us. We found one labeled "Monterey Catholic Convent." We stared in astonishment. There was the same building Miss McCormick had painted, but it had crosses over the doors and a chime tower on the roof! We ordered a copy and returned to Monterey to take out our old files and start searching for more information.

Today all evidence of the convent on Calle Principal is gone. A recently completed large hotel occupies the entire block where the convent and other buildings once stood. We wonder, when the new hotel opened and the citizens of Monterey were dancing and dining there, how many remembered the tales of the first convent of California and the romance of the first California-born woman who "took the veil" there? Concepcion Arguello met Nicolai Petrovich Rezanov, Chamberlain of the Czar of Russia in 1805 when he came south from the Russian outpost of present Alaska, hoping to open a trade that would supply the Russians with needed fresh produce and grain. He and his officers were made welcome in the home of the then Commandant of the Presidio of San Francisco, Josef Dario Arguello. Arguello was also father of a large family including a young beauty, Concepcion, aged fifteen. According to the record written by one of the expedition, G.H. Langsdorff:

The sparkling eyes of Dona Concepcion had made upon him [Rezanov] a deep impression, and pierced his innermost soul. He conceived the idea that through a marriage with the daughter of the Commandante of the Presidio of San Francisco a close bond would be formed for future business. He had therefore decided to sacrifice himself, by wedding Dona Concepcion, to the welfare of his country, and to bind in friendly alliance both Spain and Russia.

Rezanov, in his own narrative, wrote:

My proposal was a shock to her parents, whose religious upbringing was fanatical. The difficulties in religion, besides the prospective separation from their daughter, was in contemplation a dreadful blow to them ... The parents forced their daughter to church and had her confessed. They urged her to refuse me, but her brave front finally quieted them all. The holy Padres decided to leave the final decision to the Throne of Rome.

Not being able to marry her immediately, Resanov did force a betrothal which was to be kept secret for awhile. When his ship sailed for Alaska and the coast of Siberia he promised that it would be less than two years before he returned with the Czar's permission to marry. Attempting the 2,000-mile land journey across Siberia before the rains came, he fell ill and did not reach Irkutsk until February. He fainted and fell from his horse. A hoof struck him on the head. On a day in early March he was buried in the cemetery of Krasoyarsk. California legends of the romance often state that his betrothed did not hear

of his death for forty years, but historians now know that she knew within six years at the latest. She put away the beautiful garments she had been sewing for her wedding, put on the habit of a nun (although without vows) and dedicated her life to teaching children and to helping the poor and sick. She went to live in Santa Barbara and her story became well-known. Foreign visitors wrote of seeing her at various times, still beautiful of face and full of grace as the years passed.

Perhaps we should start again, telling the story of the Convent in chronological order beginning with the dreams and hopes of a Dominican priest who, while traveling in Europe, was told that he would be Bishop of Monterey. Jose Alemany, son of Antonio Alemany Ferrer and Miguela Conill, was born July 13, 1814, in the town of Vich in the Catalan region of Spain. He was one of eleven children, seven of whom embraced the religious life. At the age of sixteen he entered the novitiate, taking his vows September 23, 1831, and being named Brother Joseph Sadoc Alemany. He studied in Rome, had parochial experience in various European locations and was encouraged to learn English to be qualified for the English-speaking missions. In 1840 he came to the United States, and with companions arrived at his new Dominican home, Saint Joseph's Convent in Somerset, Ohio. From there he worked in Cuba; various locations in Chili; in Nashville, Tennessee; etc. He became a naturalized citizen of the United States October 27, 1845.

Meanwhile, on the west coast of this continent political changes were developing among the Mexican government, the unhappy residents of Alta California, and the various nations that looked longingly on this fertile land. When Commodore John Drake Sloat of the U.S. Navy raised the U.S. flag on July 7, 1846, over the Custom House at Monterey, a vast area of the west became part of the United States and open to newcomers from the east. Then, less than two years later, the gold rush started a flood of immigrants into the ports of California; most of them were English-speaking. The Catholic Church authorities were faced with the need for English-speaking priests and nuns to serve in California. In 1849 Rev. Charles Pius Montgomery, born in Kentucky and serving in the Ohio area, was appointed the California area Bishop. But Father Montgomery wrote asking to be relieved of the appointment because, "My health is such as to render me totally unable to discharge the duties."

During the next spring Father Alemany and his companion priest, Father Vilarrasa, were in Europe attending the General Chapter meeting of the Dominicans. June 12th he wrote in his personal diary, "Cardinal Fransoni tells me that I am the Bishop of Monterey and that I should soon prepare for consecration." June 16th he had an audience with the Pope. Before he could refuse the appointment (as he felt himself unworthy), the Pope said, "You must go to California; there is no alternative. Where others are drawn by gold, you must go to carry the Cross. God will assist you." After his consecration Father Alemany went to Lyons in France, then traveled north to Paris stopping at shrines along the way to kneel with his petition for help for the diocese confined to his care. In Paris he requested help from the Sisters of Charity and succeeded in recruiting three nuns. Going on to Ireland he pleaded for priests to care for the gold rush people of California and obtained the promise of several seminarians to be with Father Vilarrasa.

On October 12, 1850, Bishop Alemany, Father Vilarrasa, and the three Dominican sisters arrived in New York. They went to Ohio where two sisters were left to study for awhile. Later in the month the Bishop, Father Vilarrasa, and Sister Mary Goemare (one of the three nuns) started their long trek west. They sailed from New York on the ship *Crescent City*, crossed the Isthmus on muleback, and proceeded up the California Coast on the Steamer *Colombia*, arriving in San Francisco December 6th, 1850. Before another month had passed, in January of 1851 Bishop Alemany presented his papal documents to

the Vicar Capitular of the Diocese, Father Gonzales Rubio in Santa Barbara, and received the archives of the diocese, all the pontificalia and articles belonging to his predecessor, etc. After a few days of business in Santa Barbara, Bishop Alemany appointed Father Rubio Vicar Vorane for the southwest area of what then comprised the Diocese of Monterey, and came to Monterey. He recorded in the *Libro Borrador* (Bishop's daily journal), "I establish myself at Monterey, receiving board and lodging from the kind hospitality of the Gonzales family ... and others." He made a trip to San Francisco and Sacramento to arrange affairs and returned to Monterey in March, bringing with him Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary Goemare (whom by then he termed "Mother Mary Goemare" as she was to be the Mother Superior of the convent here). Alemany wrote on March 6th, "Mr. William Hartnell offers us his home for twelve months." The Hartnell home, built by the prominent English resident William E.P. Hartnell for his family, stood on the site of the present Monterey Hospital. During the 1850s the Hartnell family members were living most of the time on their rancho near Salinas so the house was available.

Various stories have come down to us about the coming of the Dominican sisters to Monterey. The Doud family said that when the sisters first arrived Francis Doud, whose small home still stands on Van Buren Street, met the steamer at the dock and took the sisters to his own home for refreshments and rest. And young Lieutenant Alfred Sully of the U.S. Army wrote a letter from Monterey to his parents about the arrival. Sully had been out of town for several weeks and returned to find his wife's mother and her household had moved in with his own wife. He wrote:

The Bishop of Monterey has brought here some nuns to make a convent. They are staying at the Don's until their convent is fixed so they have at the house (wife's parents') twenty-six souls to take care of for nothing. What would you say if unexpected 26 souls would knock at your door some morning for board and lodging? That's hospitality, and that's running it on with a vengeance.

We are certain that the excitement in Monterey must have been high, and the preparations going on for the opening of a school must have been the topic of every family table where there was a daughter of proper age.

During the years when the Monterey History and Art Association was first formed (1930s) we heard tales about the convent that had been here some 80 years before. Miss Maria Antonia Field, whose ancestral home is now partly encased in the Casa Munras Garden Motel, wrote a letter:

Among the first pupils registered were Engracia and Dolores Munras, great-aunts of my brother Esteban and myself; there was Mariana Malarin of the Arguello family; Luisa Moreno who became the wife of Sheriff Thomas Watson; Soledad Romie who became Mrs. David Jacks, mother of the Jacks sisters who have done so much for Monterey; there was Dolores Sanchez, aunt of Mrs. Maria Antonia Bach Thompson; there was Amelia Cooper who became the wife of Eusebio Molera and mother of Miss Frances Molera who owns the Cooper adobe.

We know of two other local girls who attended: Ana Hartnell who became Mrs. Pedro Zabala of Salinas; and Marianna Gomez who married Thomas Day, a county official.

On April 1, 1851, Concepcion Arguello arrived in Monterey by the coastwise steamer to enter the convent. She had been living for some years with the Burkes, prominent Catholic family of Santa Barbara. There Nicholas A. Den, Irish physician, offered his fine carriage to take Concepcion to the steamer. Santa Barbara residents watched with love, pride and sadness the departure of this woman who had dedicated her life to helping others and who had influenced so many in her faith.

On April 11, 1851, Father Vilarrasa presided at the religious clothing of Concepcion. She became Sister Maria Dominica, the first native-born nun of the State of California. At

the age of sixty this woman, who had been offered a life of honor at the Czar's court, joyfully entered the convent in Monterey to serve her remaining years as a Dominican nun. Six years later she died when the convent was in Benicia, and lies buried with her sister nuns. It is of interest that one of her older brothers, Jose Ignacio Maximo Arguello, who had been baptised at Mission San Gabriel in June of 1782 and had been sent to Mexico to be educated, became a priest there. Thus he was the first Alta California male to join the priesthood.

Probably a number of young boarders had already arrived in Monterey from the bay area and thus were present to see the clothing of Sister Dominica. We feel certain that the local families with their daughters were all present. Some of the mothers and grandmothers present had known Concepcion Arguello as a young girl, and several were cousins of hers. The actual school program did not start until April 28th when the doors opened wide to the pioneer pupils. Twelve boarders and sixty day pupils were present for the first classes. The main problem was that of communication as the language of the students was Spanish. Father Vilarrasa wrote to his parents:

There are no more than five sisters who speak three different languages, namely Spanish, French, and English. At first it was like the Tower of Babel, not being able to understand one another.

Thus, for Mother Goemare it was a joyful day to have the new Sister Dominica with them: Mother could only speak French. Shortly afterward another Spanish-speaking sister, Donna Maria Ignacia Moraga, arrived. Both Bishop Alemany (when he was in town) and Father Vilarrasa taught in the school. Father Vilarrasa was also chaplain and spiritual director, and saw to it that the curriculum embodied the broad structure of classic learning. Under his guidance and the Dominican priests who followed him, the sisters had on the faculty those who would teach Latin, Natural Philosophy and whatever else might be requested. The sisters conducted classes in all other subjects, including French, music, and plain and fancy needlework. We know, for example, that Captain J.B.R. Cooper paid during this early period for music lessons for Amelia. Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa lived in a small house near the convent at first. Two sister volunteers from the Mother House in Somerset, Ohio, arrived in July at Monterey; and in August, Jacinta Castro entered the convent and received her habit on the 30th. Thus the teaching staff increased.

Problems of supply were always faced. The ripples from the gold rush had increased the cost of even simple items to unbelievable heights. But help came from generous Catholics and from friends near and far. The Convent of the Cross in France (from which Mother Goemare had come) sent habit cloth, printed music and books. Even a reed organ packed in a zinc box to protect it from water damage eventually arrived in Monterey. During his first year Bishop Alemany faced serious housing problems. Both the Convent under Mother Goemare and the seminarians under Father Vilarrasa needed permanent homes. The Hartnell house had only been lent for 12 months. On November 27, 1851, Bishop Alemany received a deed to property on Larkin street for the priests. The lot had on it a small white painted house and a log house. The seller was Charles T. Botts, former U.S. Naval storekeeper and member of the Constitutional Convention in 1849. Botts had purchased the property in 1849 from Thomas O. Larkin. The price was one thousand dollars. Several weeks before this purchase Bishop Alemany wrote, "Make a verbal contract with Manuel Jimeno about his house. Pay \$2,000 and the other \$3,000 in from two to five years." Obviously funds came from somewhere and there was no need to wait two to five years, for on February 19, 1852, a deed was signed by Manuel Jimeno and his wife transferring the property and receiving the full five thousand dollars. The building on this lot was described in the deed as the large new two-story adobe house adjoining the dwelling of

the Jimenos on the north. The structure was one hundred and forty-six feet long, faced present Calle Principal, and the lot ran back to present Pacific Street. There was a stone wall around the property. The house faced directly on the street, while the Jimeno home adjoining on the south was set back some distance from the street. So the deed confirms the old photographs. Just when the new building was prepared for convent and school we do not know, but the entrance door was properly framed with a cross above it, and a chime tower was placed on the shingled roof.

An interesting point is that an examination of the old photograph of the two buildings leads one to believe that they were designed by some builder or builders who were not of the architectural school that had produced the former adobes of Monterey. A gutter ran along the entire front of the convent, and rain spouts came down from the roof for the two stories. There was no balcony on the building. From some evidence we found we think it is possible that the convent was built for a hotel by Albert G. Toomes from Missouri and/or Robert Hasty Thomas from Maine. The two men worked as carpenter-builder partnership in Monterey from about 1841. During the late Mexican period the Mexican officials, including Jimeno, granted them ranchos in Tehama County.

During the winter of 1852 a new boarder arrived at the convent. Francisca Manuela Salgado, better known as "Vinnie." She became the special charge of Sister Dominica. Behind this girl was a tragedy of California. Lieutenant Sully, after the death of his wife from childbirth, moved in with his mother-in-law next to the convent. He wrote to his parents the following:

For want of anything better to do I have been amusing myself for the past month as a carpenter for the Dona. Have built her a chicken house, a duck house, a duck pond and various other useful and ornamental affairs ... But I have another object of interest ... Next door is the Convent of Santa Catalina, and by sundry holes in the fence I have a fine view of the nuns in their white robes of the Order of St. Dominico. Among them is a young Mexican girl who resembles very much Manuela [his dead wife]. When young, she and my wife were playmates. But the poor girl has had a very sad life of it. Her father, in a fit of jealousy without the least particle of cause, killed her mother. A party of Americans, it being at the time of the war, who were nearby seized him and shot him without judge or jury ... The girl has since been taken under the protection of a California woman who has taken the veil and has taken the girl with her into the convent.

That same winter brought to Monterey another teaching center. Father Vilarrasa had been given approbation by the Dominican Vicar General to establish a monastery. It was licensed under the title The Most Holy Name of Jesus, and the first novitiate was founded February 4, 1852, with six novices from Catalonia.

Bishop Alemany was busy developing churches and other schools in California but he never forgot Monterey. After a trip to the east he returned through Mexico, arriving home November 6th with two Mexican postulants for Mother Goemare and a subdeacon for Father Vilarrasa. At the end of the year of 1852 Bishop Alemany prepared a report to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction as to the teachers and pupils in Catholic schools in California. It is amazing to note that within two years he had been able to help in the establishment of twelve Catholic schools throughout the state. For Monterey he listed two: the one under Sister M. Goemare and Dominican sisters with 60 pupils; and the one under Rev. Sadoc Vilarrasa with 35 pupils.

In 1853 Bishop Alemany sold to Sister M. Goemare, Sister Luise O'Neil and Sister Rose Castro the convent building and lot on Calle Principal. He had paid \$5,000 for the property and sold it for a token payment of five dollars.

*To be continued.*

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