

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Cross at the Carmel River Mouth

A great redwood cross now stands silhouetted against the sky over the eminence of land that rises from the Carmel River mouth, a modern replica of the one erected 181 years ago this month by the Portola expedition. There has been frequent mention of the cross in news stories of recent weeks concerning the acquisition of the land upon which it stands and the mouth of the Carmel River by the State of California as a game preserve. It may be that there are many persons residing on the Monterey Peninsula today who do not know the history of the cross and reason for placing it where it is.

It was on Sunday, December 10, 1944, that a special dedicatory program was planned by the Monterey History and Art Association at the mouth of the river near the cross. The informal ceremony was held at 2 o'clock with Father Michael O'Connell, pastor of the Carmel Mission, officiating at the dedication, and brief talks were given by Colonel Roger S. Fitch and Carmel Martin, president and vice president of the association. Father O'Connell, Father Eugene McDonald and two acolytes, Bobby Osborne and Frank DeAmaral, were at the site of the cross.

Harry Downie, curator at Carmel Mission, personally donated the material and workmanship of the cross which rises 16 feet above the ground and carries a 10 foot crossbeam, all of stout 12 by 12 inch native redwood from the nearby Santa Lucia mountains. The cross had been erected the week previous to the celebration and stands in approximately the same spot that the original cross was left by the Portola Expedition in 1769.

In his talk on the day of dedication Colonel Fitch pointed out that the event was an historic rather than a religious one. The cross was the conventional Spanish cross and was erected by Don Gaspar de Portola, governor of the Californias and leader of the first land expedition to Monterey, as a marker to attract the attention of any supply ships which might sail up the coast after the expedition had left Monterey to return to San Diego.

The personnel of this expedition, which left San Diego on the 14th of July 1779, contains some of the best known names in California history.

In addition to Portola, there were: Rivera, commandant of California from 1773 to 1777, killed in the Yuma revolt on the Colorado in 1781; Fages, first commandant of California, 1769-1773, and governor, 1782 to 1790; Sgt. Ortega, pathfinder, explorer, discoverer of the Golden Gate and of Carquinez Straits, commandant of the Presidio of San Diego, Santa Barbara and Monterey; founder of the Presidio of Santa Barbara and the missions of San Juan Capistrano and San Buenaventura.

Among the rank and file were men not less known; Pedro Amador, who gave his name to Amador County; Juan Bautista Alvarado, grandfather of Governor Alvarado; Jose Rainmundo Carrillo, later commandant of the Presidio of Monterey and founder of the great Carrillo family; Jose Antonio Yorba, sergeant of Catalonia volunteers, founder of the family of that name and grantee of the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana; Pablo de Cota, Jose Ignacio Oliveras, and others.

The party, 64 in all, including the two priests, Father Crespi, later to be associated with father Junipero Serra at Carmel Mission, and Father Gomez, as well as soldiers, muleteers, Christian Indians and servants, left San Diego, some of the party already sick and scurvy-stricken, with the understanding that one or all of the three ships, the San Carlos, San Jose or San Antonio might later sail north from San Diego to supply the land expedition. Actually none of the ships ever left San Diego that year, the San Jose being lost at sea before reaching San Diego. It was in the hope of attracting these ships that the cross was erected.

The expedition missed Monterey Bay on the way north, arrived at San Francisco, turned south again, and on November 28, 181 years ago, camped in "the Canada of the Carmelo."

Portola failed to recognize Monterey Bay from the highly colored description given earlier by Viscaino, and with his situation becoming very grave the food supply nearly gone, and believing he had failed in his quest for the "Puerto de Monterey" decided to return to San Diego.

On Sunday, December 10, they began the retreat from Monterey. Before leaving Carmelo bay they set up the large cross on a little hill on the shore of the

“ensenadita” and on it cut into the wood, the legend:
“Dig at the foot you will find a writing.”

A message was put into a bottle and buried at the foot of the cross. It gave all the facts of the expedition, its commander, date of starting and data concerning the country traversed.

Upon leaving, the expedition actually camped the next day on the shores of Monterey Bay, where they erected another signal cross, after which they began the return march to San Diego, completely unaware of having discovered the object of their expedition.