

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **A Narrow Escape**

Now that announcement has been made of the proposed restoration of Mission San Juan Bautista to its original appearance, it is timely that we repeat a story of a bull fight that took place many years ago in the plaza of this little Spanish village. The author of the story was Nellie Duncan Gleason and the small booklet in which it was printed was entitled "San Juan Bautista, Souvenir Centennial Celebration, June 24, 1897, by Frank B. Abbe and Nellie Duncan Gleason, with drawings by Joe D. Gleason." **[NOTE: the following 2 sentences are not factual; Rowena Abdy was married to and later divorced from Harry Bennett Abdy]** Mr. Abbe was the husband of the late Rowena Meeks Abbe, noted artist. They made their home both on the Peninsula and in San Juan for many years.

San Juan Mission restoration includes tearing off the present bell tower and replacing it with one that will be a duplicate of the original, and thus giving this, the largest of the Franciscan missions, the appearance it had when first built. Three front entrances will be restored, as well as the tile floor in the sanctuary.

Eventually three aisles of the huge basilica-type church will be restored. Two have been walled off since the 1906 earthquake. Current project, to be completed in the early summer, includes installation of radiant heat. Mr. Harry Downey of Carmel, is in charge of the project.

Mrs. Gleason, who grew up in San Juan, tells in her story that life in the Missions in Pueblo days was far from being quiet, staid and refined, as it is today, therefore she did not think it amiss to recall some of the sports which were frequently indulged in. At San Juan they were usually held in the plaza facing the arched corridor of the mission.

Mrs. Gleason saw the bull and bear fight which she described, at the age of 7, and she says it was so indelibly impressed upon her childish mind that it was recalled with much more distinctness than others which occurred at a more recent date.

The fight took place in the plaza which was, and still is, bounded on the north side by the church, on the west by the old Plaza Hotel and Patrick Breen's house (once the residence and headquarters of General Castro), on the south by a long continuous row of adobe buildings,

which, like the Breen house and the Plaza Hotel, was two-story, with a veranda running full length above and below: while to the east a sloping hillside led down to the old mission orchard. The entrances and exits were through narrow street-ways at the corners, Mrs. Gleason recalls.

It was the afternoon of a long summer day and Mrs. Gleason, then Nellie Duncan, was returning home from school, a little clapboard building on the side of the hill and became aware that the verandas and porches were crowded with people. But fete days were too common in those days to excite any particular wonderment. She noticed also that a large bull was standing sullen in the center of the plaza. She had never seen a bull fight, and being used to Spanish cattle had very little fear of them. She started across the plaza from Mr. Breen's porch (which had no fence in front of it then) to play under the archways of the church in the cool shade.

Suddenly, she relates, the crowd sent up a wild shout, and one of the vaqueros dashed across the plaza, and reaching down snatched her up in his arms, putting spurs to his horse and swiftly returning, handed her to some Spanish ladies on the balcony above. They were muchly frightened, she remembers, and kissed her and called her *povricita* meaning "poor little one." She stayed with them and watched the performance.

"After one bull had been killed and dragged away, another young, slender, graceful beast, brindle in color and with sharp, slender horns came in with long strides and a swinging trot, holding his head high in the air," recalled Mrs. Gleason. "A grizzly bear, secured by a long chain which was fastened to the flag pole in the center of the plaza, was then turned into the arena with the bull. When attacked by the bull, the old bruin pulled loose from his chain, clambered over a broken corner of the wall and hid himself behind the mission buildings, where he was later secured with lassoes." It is now nearing sunset, as the writer of the tale recalls, and the day's sports are ended, but she continues "Civilization has since done away with such cruel pastimes in California."

The setting for this true story, which probably happened more than 75 years ago, is now the property of the State of California and under the supervision of the Division of Parks and Beaches, with a curator in charge. The Plaza Hotel and the Castro House as well as the Zanetta House, are open to the public and the plaza, we imagine, looks very much as it looked July 17, 1846,

when Captain Fremont took possession there. The old barracks were sold to the Breen family and by adding a second story of wood, they turned it into a hotel and it has since been known as the Plaza.

Mr. Frank B. Abbe, co-author of the booklet with Mrs. Gleason, is the father of Frank Abbe Jr. of Carmel, who is in business in Monterey. He was a graduate of the San Jose Normal School with the class of 1883, and taught school in San Juan until he became a merchant in that little city, where he was in business for 45 years. He passed away in 1931.