

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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An Early School

On the northwest corner of Calle Principal and Franklin streets where now stand the San Carlos garage and the Moose Lodge building, there is a Monterey History and Art Association historical marker where once stood one of the leading educational institutions of the state. Saint Catherine's Academy, as this school was named, was opened in 1851 by three nuns of the Dominican Order, under the director of the Right Reverend Joseph Alemany, O.P., Bishop of Monterey.

Bishop Alemany, a native of Spain, feeling the call of the missionary, left his native country in the early 1840's to come to America. After zealously laboring in the Atlantic states, he resolved to pass the remainder of his life in the Spanish-speaking settlements on the Pacific coast. In 1850 he was consecrated Bishop of Monterey and realizing the need of a school for girls, and the necessity of having religious women to instruct the children of his new flock, he sent east for Sister Mary Goemare, a French nun of the Dominican Order, and a very cultured young woman. She came in answer to his appeal, accompanied by two other sisters of her order. Sister Mary Frances Stafford and Sister Mary Aloysia O'Neal.

They came to California by way of Aspinwall and Panama; from there they traveled on mule back. On November 16, 1850, they left Panama on the steamer Columbus, reaching San Francisco on December 6, 1850. When they arrived in Monterey a few days later they were met by Mr. Francis Doud and taken to his home on Van Buren and Scott streets, where he and Mrs. Doud entertained them until other quarters were provided. The Doud home is the charming long, low, white, colonial house now occupied by Mrs. Frank Baker, the granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Francis Doud.

On January 1, 1851, the sisters, at the invitation of William E.P. Hartnell, opened a school in his residence, now the site of the Monterey hospital. Owing to the increased attendance, all the pupils could not be accommodated and shortly afterward the school was moved to a new building on Calle Principal near Franklin. The building was of adobe brick and had been built by Don Manuel Jimeno, a brother-in-law of Mrs. Hartnell. This building had been constructed as a hotel and adjoined the Jimeno residence. The convent was formally opened and named St. Catherine's Academy.

The first woman in California to enter the new novitiate was Maria Concepcion Arguello, the daughter of Don Jose Arguello, governor of California 1814-1815, and sister of Don Luis Antonio Arguello, second governor of California under Mexican rule. The charming and pathetic story of her romance and the death of her Russian lover is another story. After hearing of his death she became an unofficial Dominican nun or beata, at Monterey and when the convent moved to Benecia she accompanied the sisters and died there on December 23, 1857. Her body rests in the private Dominican cemetery at Benecia, overlooking Suisun Bay.

Another worker and teacher at the convent was Fannie O'Neal, the adopted sister of Mrs. Willa Tecumseh Sherman, the wife of General Sherman of Civil War fame.

Instruction in reading, writing, grammar, mathematics, as well as French, English and Spanish, and music and needlework, were given at the academy. The charge for tuition in the regular branches and board was \$400 a year, while day pupils were received at \$2 a month. There were 150 pupils, many coming from different parts of the state.

The following members of Monterey families, enrolled as the academy's first pupils: Luisa Moreno (Mrs. Thomas Watson, wife of an early Monterey County sheriff and mother of Mrs. Fred Treat of Carmel); Soledad Romie (Mrs. David Jacks, mother of Mrs. Mary Thomas and Miss Margaret Jacks); Ana Hartnell (Mrs. Pedro Zabala, mother of Ana and Albert Zabala of San Francisco); Dolores and Engracia Munras (Dolores became Mrs. Alonso Allen and Engracia married John Callaghan, an early day Monterey postmaster and doctor); Mariana Gomez and Maria Malarin (whose home in Oak Grove is now owned by Mrs. A.C. Miller, were the grand nieces of Concepcion Arguello).

After the convent was closed in Monterey, the Rev. G. Sorrentini, the pastor of the Royal Presidio Chapel of the San Carlos, acting under the instruction of the Bishop, had the lower floor of the building made into a chapel and the large dormitory upstairs turned into a banquet hall. Here many of the old time fiestas, baptisms and marriages, took place. The building was later rented for parties but rapidly took on an appearance of decay and finally was wrecked by order of the pastor, the Rev. Angelo Casanova, and the adobes were used to repair the streets in the old town.

Charles Warren Stoddard, who lies buried in the Monterey cemetery, wrote in 1885: "I saw her in her decay, the once flourishing capital. The convent was windowless and its hall filled with hay."