

December 24, 1951

Early Monterey Christmas

CHRISTMAS 1846

It is Christmas eve in Monterey again as it was in 1846 when Walter Colton wrote in his diary describing his first Christmas in Monterey: "It is an old custom here for the shepherds, when they have performed their sacred drama in the church, to repeat it, during the holy-days in the residences of some of the citizens," he reported. "One of the first personages to whom they pay their respects is the chief magistrate of the jurisdiction; I was accordingly saluted this evening with their festive compliment."

"The large hall, occupying the center of the building, was sufficiently ample to accommodate them, and some fifty ladies and gentlemen, as spectators. They brought their own orchestral accompaniment, which consisted entirely of violins and guitars. Their prelude had so many sweet harmonies that the listener determined to listen on."

The dialogue and chant of the shepherds would have awakened their appropriate associations but for the obtrusions of the hermit, hunter, and the devil, who now gave much freer scope to their characteristic peculiarities than they did in the church. The hermit forgot that his lash was intended for himself, and began to use it on others. The hunter left off snaring birds, and commenced setting springs to catch Satan; but his intended victim not only managed to escape, but to decoy the hunter himself into his own net. The hermit tried to disenchant him through the power of his missal; but this having no effect, he threatened to chastise the subtle author of the mischief, but wanted someone to seize and hold him, for fear his horn, hoof or tail might come in conflict with the lite-glass. During this side-acting the dialogue and chant of the shepherds went on, though it would be difficult to conceive of any two things more wide asunder in the spirit and effect. The whole was concluded with the riata dance by the shepherds, who executed its airy movements with a lightness and precision of step that would have thrown enchantment on any occasion less sacred in its associations than the present.

In 1847, Walter Colton once again entered in his diary Monterey's Christmas Eve story:

"As soon as the sun had gone down, and twilight had spread its sable shadows over the hills and habitations of Monterey, the festivities of Christmas Eve commended. The bells rang out a merry chime; the windows were filled with streaming light; bonfires on plain and steep sent up their pyramids of flame; the sky-rocket burst high over all in showering fire. Children shouted; the young were filled with smiles and gladness; and the aged looked as if some dark cloud had been lifted from the world."

The bells still ring out but there are no bonfires on the hills and ski-rockets are reserved for the Fourth of July. But the church still plays the very central part in the celebration of the birth of Christ.

While the bonfires still blazed high in 1847, the celebrating crowd moved towards the church, the Royal Presidio Chapel, then known as Presidio Church of Our Lady of Refugio. Colton attended the service and wrote this description: "The ample nave was soon filled. Before the high altar bent the Virgin Mother, in wonder and love, over her newborn babe; a company of shepherds entered in flowing robes, with high wands garnished with silken streamers, in which floated all the colors of the rainbow, and surmounted with coronals of flowers. In their wake followed a hermit, with his long white beard, tattered missal, and his sin-chastising lash. Near him figured a wild hunter, in the skins of the forest, bearing a huge truncheon, surmounted by an iron rim, from which hung in jingling chime fragments of all sonorous metals."

Most of the characters in this Christmas drama were played by children of the early families of Monterey. The Pastorela, composed by Padre Florencio of the Soledad mission and a copy of which is among the Vallejo documents, was the favorite dramatic production. Bancroft wrote that Pio Pico used to play the part of Bato (?), the chief shepherd. But the best player and the one the children loved, was Jacinto Rodriguez, who used to practice his part on the beach much to their delight.

The Christmas Eve of 1847 found the Evil One also present at the church. Walter Colton, Monterey's first Alcalde and the builder of Colton Hall, describes this

creature as possessing a horned frontlet, disguised hoof, and robe of crimson flame. The shepherds were led on by the angel Gabriel, in purple wings and garments of light. They approached the manger, and kneeling, hymned their wonder and worship in a sweet chant, which was sustained by the rich tones of exulting harps.

The hermit and hunter were not among them, by this time they had been “beguiled by the Tempter, and were lingering at a game of dice,” wrote our eyewitness. “The hermit began to suspect that all was not right, and read his missal vehemently in the pauses in the game; but the hunter was troubled by none of these scruples, staked his soul, and lost! Emboldened by his success the Tempter shoved himself among the shepherds; but there he encountered Gabriel, who knew him of old. He quailed under the eye of that invincible angel, and fled his presence. The hermit and hunter, once more disenthralled, paid their penitential homage. The shepherds departed, singing their hosannas, while the voices of the whole assembly rose in the choral strain.”

CHRISTMAS 1855

“We have had one of the most pleasant Christmas times during the past week Monterey has seen for several years,” wrote the editor of the Monterey Sentinel in 1855.

After that introduction our reporter of the holidays of almost a hundred years ago went on to tell more of the event. “Our population being mostly Catholic, great preparations were made at the old Presidio Church of Our Lady of Refugio, which for the last 70 years has been the scene of every high religious ceremony in our ancient pueblo.

“On Christmas Eve our zealous cura had the church fitted up in a manner highly creditable to his taste. With a very pleasant forethought of his as we took it, large piles of wood had been stacked close by the church and set a burning for the double purposes of illumination and warming the gentle during the night, which was bitter cold, with a dry, old-fashioned full moon riding high through a clear sky, unobscured with a single cloud.” At 12 midnight people began to flock toward the church, to attend the Mass of Chanticleer of San Pedro – or, as the Spaniards call it – Misa de Galo.”

“The Rev. Padre was received by the orchestra, with music from the piano. The ceremony of the Mass was

done in excellent order and effect; the music and the singing of the service being performed by the new choir of ladies and gentlemen with great credit, and so as to give pleasure to all not affected with the splenetic in California. There was one, who in high humor, had never known the night so cold, the earth so hard, or his nose so brittle – when it thawed the doctor stitched it up and he is doing very well for a sailor 70 years old.

“In the evening a first-rate old-fashioned baile came off, where girls and boys tripped the nimble toe, and a right merry fun, without discord, prevailed until half-past one in the morning – when the musicians and company agreed mutually to turn out and go home.”