

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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To The Lowly ... a Vision

The Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe will be observed by Roman Catholics throughout Mexico and the West during the next week. The day, Dec 12, was probably first observed in California in 1769 when Portola, with the Fathers Serra and Crespi, left their camp at Carmelo Bay, crossed the pine-covered Peninsula, forded the Salinas, and for the night camped near the spot which they had occupied earlier. Here the Fathers celebrated Holy Mass in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

One of California's best examples of Mexican architecture, the Royal Presidio Chapel of San Carlos Borromeo de Monterey, honors this Saint of Old Mexico. The church in all its ornateness was the handiwork of patient Mexican Indian laborers, some of them imported from Mexico, whose naïve renderings of Mexican decorative motifs are rare examples of primitive art. The bas-relief of Our Lady of Guadalupe carved in chalk rock, is at the very top of the front façade. This carving was the subject for much interest, admiration and wonder during the years when the workers of the writers' program of the Works Projects Administration were compiling "Monterey Peninsula" under the sponsorship of the California State Department of Education. The findings were later published by the Stanford Press.

The beautiful Legend of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe as told by Emma Lindsay Squier in her book "Gringa," bears repeating in the Diary today.

On the morning of December 9, 1531, a very poor and lowly Indian, Joan Diego. Was crossing the hills of Tepeyac, which before the Spanish Conquest was sacred to the Aztec Goddess Tonantzin, protectress of corn.

Suddenly he heard the strains of sweet music. And then in an arc of blinding gold light, he saw a beautiful woman, with dark hair and skin, one who might have been a princess of her own race. But she called him "Hijo mio," as no Aztec princess would have done. And she announced herself to the dazzled awestruck, peon as the Virgin Mary.

She told him, in a voice sweet and gentle, that she wished to have a church built for her upon the summit

of the hill, and that he was to go to the Bishop Juan de Zumarraga and give him her commands.

One can imagine the fear and doubt and hesitation with which the humble Indian went to do her bidding. Would the lordly prelate give credence to the story of the divine vision? Would he not be flogged for boasting that the Lady of Heaven had actually appeared to him and spoken to him, the lowliest of the lowly!

He was not flogged – but neither was he believed. The Bishop Zumarraga was a stern man, a religious fanatic – but he was also a skeptic. He sent the trembling native away, warning him that people were burned for witchcraft in those enlightened days.

Sadly, Juan Diego approached the hill of Tepeyac again – and was confronted by the same dazzling, radiating light, in the heart of which stood the beautiful, gentle-faced Virgin.

She commanded him to be to the bishop again. This time she gave him for a sign of her divinity the instantaneous cure of his uncle, who had been dying.

But still the churchly dignitary proved himself a doubting Thomas. He sent the Indian away with scornful, impatient words. And upon the third day, the Lady of Heaven appeared to the peon again.

"Go to the summit of the hill of Tepeyac and pluck the roses that are growing there," she said, in her soft, gentle voice. "Take them in thy mantle to the bishop. This time he will believe."

Juan Diego obeyed, although he knew full well that roses did not grow in that bleak place; only cactus and thorny mesquite. But when he toiled to the brow of the hill ... he was almost overcome by the bewildering fragrance of roses. They were blooming in crimson profusion, their petals wet as with heavenly dew.

He gathered as many of them as his palm-fiber tilma would hold. Then he went again, boldly this time – and demanded audience with the Bishop Zumarraga.

This prelate stared down at the kneeling supplicant with an irascible frown. That crazy peon again with his incoherent talk of visions and a church to be built upon a pagan hill?

But when the Indian unfolded his mantle with shaking hands, opening it as reverently as if his fingers were touching a crystal chalice that contained the Host, those who watched him, cried out in wonder and rapture for a

miracle had been performed! Instead of roses, the figure of the Virgin herself was imprinted upon that humble native tilma exactly as she had appeared to Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac; eyes downcast, hands folded upon her bosom, and a golden light making an arc of glory around her slender, gracious form!

This time it was the bishop who fell on his knees, and who cried out, "To the lowly hath the vision been given! And into my unworthy hands the fulfillment of the divine command."