

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 18, 1951

Our Lady of Belen

To spend an uninterrupted afternoon within the walls of "Mision San Carlos de Borromeo de Monterey del Carmelo" was a very special privilege appreciated by the writer of the Peninsula Diary. That experience was fully realized a few days ago when Harry Downie, who has been in charge of the restoration work at the mission for many years, was the able guide.

It was a revelation to hear from Mr. Downie the history of the old stone church and to see through his eyes the beauty of the past as he enthusiastically showed us the ancient statues, the paintings, carvings and the tiny original patches of ornamental color work in various parts of the old building from which he had patterned the future decorative scheme.

It was also surprising and gratifying to be told that so much of the original furniture, silver, vestments and other ecclesiastical appointments had been returned during the past several years to their first home of more than 175 years ago, for most of these articles had either been brought to California, by Father Serra or were acquired soon after the building of the Mission.

As we entered the church near the High Altar, Mr. Downie drew our attention to the large crucifix behind it. This figure of Our Lord was carved in the Philippine Islands of mahogany native to that country and was in use in Carmel Mission almost from the beginning. The cross upon which the figure hangs is not the original one, for it had been discarded some years previous perhaps when the Mission was in disuse. One day Mr. Downie said he found a piece of hardwood which he planned to use for another purpose but when he discovered that there were nail holes at each end he quickly measured the out-stretched arms of the figure and found that the nail holes matched the holes in the figure's hands. That cross now marks the cemetery on the north side of the old Mission,

To the left of the altar is the very lovely statue of "Our Lady of Belen (Bethlehem)". This truly beautiful figure was one of the original embellishments in the Mission in Father Serra's time. She was returned to the Mission in December of 1945. It was appropriate that she should again be blessed on Christmas eve of that year, just before the midnight mass.

During the years that "Our Lady" was absent from her place in the Mission she had been tenderly cared for by members of old time families on the Peninsula. The Cantu family, who lived in an adobe dwelling in the pear orchard adjoining the church first assumed guardianship about 1850, following which the daughter of the family, Dona Maria Ignacia Dutra cared for her in her adobe home on the Monterey Mesa. When Mrs. Dutra passed away about 30 years ago, "Our Lady" was given into the care of a member of the Boronda family, who returned her to Carmel.

Mr. Downie told his visitors that the body of the figure had been destroyed but her head and hands were still beautiful. He molded a new body and dressed the completed figure in beautiful old cloth and vestments with a handsome [old?] mantilla covering her head. Her crown of hand-chased Mexican silver, covered with gold, has an interesting history.

San Carlos in accordance with Belen, or as the Spanish say "Nuestra Senora de Belen" is known to have been packed in Lower California for shipment to Monterey in 1770. A dispute arose between the Franciscan and Dominican orders as to the guardianship of the property and the shipment was delayed for four years, not arriving with other statues and church equipment, until 1775. The final court ruling was in favor of the Franciscans.

The silver crown for "Our Lady of Belen" came to the Carmel Mission as the gift of Captain Bruno de Ezeta. (Heceta) of the Santiago, as a thank offering for the safe return of the ship and its company from a voyage from San Blas with orders from Viceroy Bucareli to reach latitude 65 degrees if possible. They reached degree 49 and then were compelled to turn back, on account of illness of nearly the whole crew. They entered Monterey harbor on August 29, 1775, where they were joined on October 7, by the Sonora, which had reached 58 degrees. Eight days later the officers and crew went to Mission San Carlos in accordance with a vow made to "Our Lady of Belen." In thanksgiving of their deliverance from many dangers they had a High Mass offered up, during which they all received Holy Communion, according to the report in Father Zephyrin Engelhardt's "Mission San Carlos Borromeo."