

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 23, 1951

A Pioneer Priest

The Rev. J.S. McGowan, a pioneer priest in the early days of the Episcopal Diocese of California, was the builder of St. James' Church, Monterey; St. Paul's, Salinas; St. Luke's-in-the-Hills, Jolon; St. John's, San Miguel; St. Mark's, King City; St. Thomas' at Raymond, near Yosemite Valley, and Christ Church at Fresno Flats among the pines. This work was all accomplished between the years 1873 and 1894.

On Wednesday, May 30th, the members and friends of St. James' Church, Monterey, accompanied by the vicar, the Rev. Vincent Coletta, will join in a pilgrimage to St. Luke's-in-the-Hills at Jolon for a service in memory of the priest who pioneered in Monterey County so many years ago. At Jolon they will be joined by members of St. Mark's, King City, and others.

In his declining years the Rev. Mr. McGowan returned to Monterey and at his death was buried in the Monterey Cemetery, but his churches still are testimonials to his faithful work.

It was on the 6th day of July, 1878, the reverend gentleman about whom we write today arrived in California from Plattville, Wisc. The following day he reached his brother's home in Watsonville and learned that there had been a lynching in Monterey a few days before. "This gave me a little shock, since I thought that I had come to a civilized state," he wrote in his diary.

His first parish was in Castroville and then he began services in Salinas. Railroad fare at that time was seven cents a mile and he wrote "Your humble servant was not rich." He did not always have the cash to pay his fare, therefore that he might keep his promise "to hold the fort," he several times walked the railroad from Castroville to Salinas – a distance of 20 miles.

Before the consecration of the church at Salinas, Mr. McGowan took up his work in Monterey, driving the 20 miles from Salinas after morning services there. He held his first service "in the old capital of the state on March 14th, 1875, in the dance hall of the Washington Hotel."

Mr. McGowan's health failed at Salinas and in trying to regain it, he sought Jolon in Southern Monterey County. From his sick bed, he was called to St. Paul's in Salinas one day to baptize the children of Claude Smith of Jolon, who had traveled the 80 miles distance to have

the children baptized. He asked the priest to visit him and the invitation was accepted the following spring. While there he held Sunday services in the school house near Jolon, for which one churchman rode 30 miles from San Miguel to attend. When he had been officially transferred to the new field, he could find no house for his family, so he took up a homestead claim of government land and made preparations to build. While the new home was being completed they camped out under the oaks for three months.

In 1884 two churches were begun, one at Jolon and one at San Miguel. In later years Mr. McGowan's son, Edward McGowan, who had followed in his father's footsteps and became a priest in the Episcopal Church, had charge of the two churches.

At one service a Dr. Parker from Oakland told Mr. McGowan that if he would build a little church in Monterey his wife would give 50 dollars. This he thought was somewhat providential, and was worth a trial. A subscription was started and the sum of \$575 was pledged for the building, and \$600 more was raised in San Francisco and vicinity.

The contract was let and the church completed at a cost of about \$1200. The church building was consecrated by Bishop Kip, July 14, 1878, and was the first Protestant church in Monterey. "I must say," wrote the clergyman in his diary, "that Princess Louise, the daughter of Queen Victoria, and her husband worshipped in this little church when they were in California."

St. James' recently suffered a fire and the interior was so badly burned that completely new walls and ceiling had to be installed. It will soon be re-consecrated by Bishop Karl Morgan Block.

Tomorrow we will write of some of Mr. McGowan's early experiences.