

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Empty Eggshells

To visit New Almaden from the Peninsula is a short and interesting motor trip with several routes to choose from. The motorist may travel over the Prunedale road and take the highway almost to San Jose, turning to the left at a directional sign before reaching that city, or go to Watsonville and travel over the Hecker Pass and take the back roads, which would be the writer's choice.

The country through which one passes is still pretty much as it was in the old days, mountains, tree laden hills, extensive farms and green orchards to greet the appreciative eye.

Almaden was a mining community before the gold rush to California. More than twenty million dollars in quicksilver have been taken from the mines there. The first New Almaden "Mineros" came from Mexico in 1847.

They built their homes on a knoll not far from the original excavation and besides the little cottages, eventually there was a little Catholic church, school, boarding house, cantina (saloon) and a butcher shop, according to "The Academy Scrapbook."

These buildings were scattered along the knoll in an irregular manner due to the contour of the ground. This section, called Spanish Town was chiefly along one lone, steep, narrow, rocky street.

Cornish miners started coming to New Almaden in the late 1850's. These were followed by greater numbers in the 60's and 70's. The first ones, so we have been told were from Grass Valley. They established themselves across the small gully from the Mexican camp. They were Methodists and had an imposing church on the northern slope of Church Hill.

For many years the steeple of that church was a landmark all over Santa Clara Valley. The Cornishmen had a school, a recreation hall, boarding house and a resident physician who also cared for the Mexican families.

Another interesting custom at New Almaden and which will be of interest to Monterey because it was a Cascaron Ball, is reported in the Pony Express.

The Cascaron Ball was held originally in the Big Planilla at the mouth of the main or San Francisco Tunnel. After 1870, it was held at the Spanishtown boarding house near Big Rock.

The Methodist church at Cornishtown was built about 1884. The first building was destroyed by fire and the second blown down in a severe storm. It was reanchored, mining style by Captain John Harry, and remained there until 1918.

Mr. Lawrence Bulmore, a son of Robert R. Bulmore, who was a member of the official staff at the mine from 1878 to 1900, writes: "New Almaden was the original name but in 1921, the post office there was closed. When they reopened it in 1932 at the old Hacienda, it was called simply Almaden but the community is still called New Almaden."

The present post office is on the right-hand side of the main street, near the well-kept State Highway Maintenance and Fire Station. It appears to be the very smallest building in this old community.

We quote: "One of the Mexican customs, the Cascaron Ball became the annual social event of the community. This was a local name. The proper name was Baile de Carnaval and it was the termination of Carnestoldendas, the three day fiesta held just before Ash Wednesday.

"As the cascaron was the most important accessory of the dance, the ball at New Almaden was so named. Months before the Lenten season, the housewives began collecting egg shells.

"Whenever possible eggs were not broken but drained through a small opening at one end and the shells set aside to dry. When the time for the ball arrived the senoras and señoritas made the egg shells into Cascarones. Colored paper was cut into confetti and a thimble full was put into each shell. The end was then sealed with colored paper and lo! The Cascaron. The egg shells being empty were symbolic of the abstinence from meat that was to follow the carnival the word carnival being a derivation from the Latin meaning 'goodbye to flesh.'"