

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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From Golden Age to Age of Gold

We residents of Monterey can see on all sides traces of early California history, but in not one of our many historical buildings are we able to learn how the building was constructed, how family life was carried on there in the "hacienda days," or how it was furnished originally. Because the Casa de Adobe in Los Angeles provides just such interesting information, a visit there is truly unforgettable.

"It would be difficult to find, in any age or place, a community that got more out of life, and with less trouble, less wear and wickedness, than the people of Pastoral California." So wrote Bancroft, the historian and he is not the only writer who has expressed the same idea. The records are full of the generous hospitality of the old Spanish rancheros; of the carefree happy life that bloomed within the adobe walls of the homes gracing their broad acres before California's "Golden Age" had given way to its "Age of Gold."

The handbook of the Casa de Adobe declares: "Where are these homes today? The great ranchos, most of them, have passed into the hands of strangers; the hospitable old houses have, in the main, fallen into shapeless weed-grown mounds, or have been "restored" and modernized beyond recognition. A surviving Spanish ranch house that still carries with it the spirit of yesterday is rare indeed; and as for modern homes built after the old style, while the outside may be beautiful and satisfying to the eye, the interiors and furnishings are usually most disappointing." To quote the late Harry Carr, the Spanish atmosphere, is as a rule, only "tile deep."

Luckily for us who love California and her history, the value of the missions was recognized before it was too late, and some of them we saved in time to preserve for posterity the background of the old religious life; but, unluckily for us, the things that might have told of the homelife of the Dons have been scattered to the four winds or simply given over to moth and rust. So the Casa De Adobe was born and it certainly is an excellent example of what might have been done or may still be done in Monterey.

Mr. O'Melveny, who was the father of the Casa, wrote: "We began to study the form of the new building, and in June, 1916, Mr. and Mrs. Randolph Huntington Miner and Mrs. O'Melveny and myself made a trip for the purpose of examining the best example remaining of the old adobe residence. The home of the O'Neils in Santa Margarita was a good example of how one of the old houses could be converted into a modern dwelling. But the old residence of the Coutts at Guajame, in San Diego County, was the nearest to the old type to be found anywhere; in fact, it may be said that the patio of the Casa de Adobe was patterned directly after the patio of the Rancho Guajame. During all of this period we had the active assistance of Dr. Hector Alliot, at the time the director of the Southwest Museum."

The house was to represent the home of young newly-married Californians of good family and some means. The first construction was the southwest corner of the house, but as the family and the owner's wealth increased, wings were added until finally the house was a square surrounding a central patio. The complete house consists of a formal entrance, sitting room or parlor, dining room, kitchen, bedrooms, dispensary and chapel.

Jesus Velasquez, a mild and unassuming Mexican with the soul of an artist, provided the master hand in the laying of the adobe. He plastered the kitchen walls with adobe to which goat's milk had been added, a mixture which provides a very smooth and durable finish. The adobe bricks were made on the ground where the house stands, so the Casa was literally born on the lot. The tiles for the corridor surrounding the patio were the gift of Jacob Danziger who had imported them from Tampico, Mexico. They were reputed to be at least 200 years old when he obtained them.

The doors to the chapel were constructed without the use of a single nail. One door is a replica of the entrance to San Carlos and the other is modelled after a door in the Palo Verde Hacienda. The stones that make up the center well were taken from the lot on which the Casa stands.