

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Symbols of a Vanished Era

The University of California Press has just published a fascinating book entitled "Old California Houses – Portraits and Stories" by Marion Randall Parsons.

A painter's quest for subjects was the genesis of this book, Miss Parsons states in her preface. The chosen buildings were not necessarily those marked for preservation by the historical societies, nor were the people who had lived, worked or preached in them always those best known in history. Instead, she selected structures and landmarks which seemed to her especially representative of their time, or which evoked some personal, nostalgic response in herself.

"As I sketched my way through central California," Miss Parsons explains, "time and again some shabby old structure hidden on a narrow street at the end of a country lane, on an abandoned farm or crowning a hill in an old mining camp transformed itself into a symbol of life and a land familiar to me in childhood but now fast disappearing."

The story of this vanished way of life was gathered by the author from her own memory, from the lips of pioneers, from books – and, of course, from the buildings themselves. A shop, a church, a school, a hotel, even a cemetery (as in Columbia) might yield its contribution. Every building, whether great or small, whether of adobe, frame, brick or stone construction, records something about the builders. The lives of the people who built the structures pictured in Miss Parsons' book formed the foundation and framework of California history.

In the special issue of the edition "Old California Homes," there are 17 reproductions of the author's paintings, each one illustrating a chapter. The stories, whether of the houses or of the people who lived in them, are not meant to be full-length portraits, but rather a series of thumbnail sketches designed to depict very briefly the remarkable, swift evolution of California's social history.

In perusing this delightful semi-historical book it is interesting to observe that it treats with four distinct periods in California history – "the slow-moving Spanish times, with the widely scattered dwelling places of the colorful hacendado period, the early movement of the

American settlers into Mexican territory, the period between the gold rush and the mad speculation in silver stocks, and the era of the bonanza kings. It is history of an intimate, personal kind." I quote from a statement on the book's jacket.

I have read Jane Voiles' review of the book in which she states that the illustrations used in the book have "an eerie quality that makes them look like the ghosts of their era. But there is nothing ghostly about the text." With this statement we heartily agree. There are illustrations of John Bidwell's house in Chico, Fort Ross in Sonoma County, Gen. Vallejo's adobe, the Martinez adobe in Alhambra Valley, John Marsh's home, John Muir's house near Martinez, schoolhouse and graveyard at Columbia, a store at Mokelumne Hill, St. Canice Church, Nevada City, Bonanza Kelley's house, Napa Soda Springs, Woodward's Gardens, James Flood's "Linden Towers" at Menlo Park, Adolph Sutro's house, San Francisco, and the Hopkins and Stanford houses in San Francisco.