

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 15, 1952

### **Roses in the Wilderness**

The Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe was celebrated by all Roman Catholics through Mexico and the West during the past week. The actual day, December 12, was the day that the vision of Our Lady appeared to a lowly peon, Juan Diego, as he was crossing the hills of Tepeyac in Mexico.

On an arid hill where no flower had ever grown before he gathered the roses which the Virgin had told him would be blooming there. Taking the flowers in his mantle he journeyed into town to demand another audience with Bishop Zamarraga.

This prelate stared down at the kneeling supplicant with a frown, thinking perhaps, "That crazy peon again with his incoherent talk of visions and a church to be built upon a pagan hill!"

But when the Indian with shaking hands unfolded his mantle – as reverently as if his fingers touched a crystal chalice containing the Host – those who watched cried out in wonder and rapture. No roses were to be seen, but imprinted upon Juan Diego's humble native tilma was the figure of the Virgin herself! She looked exactly as she had when she appeared to the peon on the hill of Tepeyac; eyes downcast, hands folded upon her bosom, and with an arc of golden light surrounding her slender, gracious form.

This time it was the bishop who fell on his knees, and who cried out, "To the lowly hath the vision come! And into my unworthy hands the fulfillment of the divine command!"

One of California's best example of Mexican architecture, the Royal Presidio Chapel of San Carlos Borromeo de Monterey, honors this Saint of Old Mexico. The church in all its ornateness was the handiwork of patient Mexican-Indian laborers, some of them imported from Mexico, whose naïve renderings of Mexican decorative motifs are rare examples of primitive art. The bas-relief of Our Lady of Guadalupe, carved in chalk rock, is at the very top of the front façade.

This carving was the subject for much interest, admiration and wonder during the years when the workers of the writers' project of the Works Projects Administration were compiling the "Monterey

Peninsula" under the sponsorship of the California State Department of Education. The findings were later published in the Stanford Press illustrated by a photograph of Our Lady as she appeared at San Carlos church.

Colonial New Mexico has made at least four distinctive contributions to primitive American art. Most interesting perhaps are the "santos" (saints), which are beautiful examples of unsophisticated ecclesiastical art. Also important and much imitated is the pueblo-influenced architecture, the simple, lovely silverwork and the vivid textiles.

The small wooden image of the Virgin of Guadalupe which one sees all over New Mexico is a santo. Like most of the santos made in New Mexico in the last 400 years, this Guadalupe shows some Mexican influence – which is not surprising since this state was once a colony of Old Mexico.

When New Mexico was impoverished and isolated as a Spanish possession, her inhabitants could not import religious images, crucifixes and paintings. So the padres and the people proceeded to make their own. Wood replaced plaster; paint replaced gilt and jewels. Two types of the colonial New Mexico "santo" appeared: the "bulto" or figure in the round, and the "retablo" or flat figure. The latter was usually painted on wood but sometimes on the skins of animals. The Guadalupe Virgin is generally a "bulto."

The painted pine tablets and sacred statuettes might easily be mistaken for relics of ancient Crete. Actually they were made between 1680 and 1850 in a primitive corner of western America.

Only a little more than a thousand "santos" – most of them now safely preserved in southwest museums – survived a ban placed upon them in 1851, when Archbishop John B. Lamy arrived in Santa Fe with conventional images from his native France.