

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 23, 1952

Nativity Pageant in Old Monterey

If we could be taken back tonight to Monterey on Christmas Eve of 1846 and earlier, we would be observing this holy holiday in an entirely different manner from the way it will be celebrated on the Peninsula tomorrow evening. The religious comedy of El Diablo on La Pastorela would be performed at the church with the angels, the devil, a hermit, and the clown, Bartolo, all taking part.

Walter Colton, first American Alcalde at Monterey, wrote in his journal "Three Years in California" of his first Christmas eve in California in 1846:

"As soon as the sun had gone down, and twilight had spread its sable shadows over the hills and habitations of Monterey, the festivities of Christmas eve commenced. The bells rang out a merry chime; the windows were filled with streaming light; bonfires on plains and steep sent up their pyramids of flame; the skyrockets burst high over all in a showering fire. Children shouted; the young were filled with smiles and gladness; the aged looked as if some dark cloud had been lifted from the world."

The church bells still ring out in Monterey but there are no bonfires on the hills and skyrockets are reserved for the Fourth of July, but the church still plays the central part in the celebration of the birth of Christ this Christmas time

While the bonfires still burned on the hillsides in the 1840s, the celebrating crowd moved toward the church, the Royal Presidio Chapel of San Carlos, then known as Presidio Church of Our Lady of Refugio, Colton attended this service and wrote this description in his diary:

"The ample nave was soon filled. Before the High Altar bent the Virgin Mother, in wonder and love over her new-born babe; a company of shepherds entered in flowing robes, with high wands garnished with silken streamers, in which floated all the colors of the rainbow, and surmounted with coronals of flowers. In their wake followed a hermit, with his long white beard, tattered missal, and his sin-chastising lash. Near him figured a wild hunter in the skins of the forest, bearing a huge truncheon surmounted by a iron rim, from which hung in jingling chime fragments of all sonorous metals."

Most of the characters in this Christmas drama were played by children of the early Monterey families. The Pastorela, composed by Padre Florencio of Soledad Mission, and a copy of which is among the Vallejo documents in the Bancroft Library, was the favorite dramatic production.

Bancroft wrote in his history that Governor Pio Pico used to play the part of Bato, the chief shepherd. But the best player and the one the children loved the best was Jacinto Rodriguez, who would go to the beach to practice his part where he yelled loud and long to his heart's content, much to the delight of the young people.

The Christmas eve of 1847 found the evil one also present at the church. Walter Colton describes this creature as possessing a horned frontlet, disguised hoof, and robe of crimson flame. The shepherds were led by the angel Gabriel, in purple wings and garments of light. The group approached the manger, and kneeling hymned their wonder and worship in a sweet chant, which was sustained by the rich tone of exulting harps.

The hermit and hunter were not among them. By this time they had been "beguiled by the Tempter, and were lingering at a game of dice," wrote one eyewitness. "The hermit began to suspect that all was not right, and read his missal vehemently in the pauses in the play; but the hunter troubled by none of these scruples, staked his soul and lost! Emboldened by his success, the Tempter shoved himself among the shepherds; but there he encountered Gabriel, who knew him of old. He quailed under the eye of that invincible angel, and fled his presence. The hermit and hunter, once more disenthralled, paid their penitential homage. The shepherds departed, singing their hosannas, while the voices of the whole assembly rose in choral strain."