

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 26, 1952

'La Pastorela'

The production of Pastorela or traditional Christmas play, which was performed in Monterey in the early days, did not end with its presentation at the Church of Our Lady of Refugio, now known as the Royal Presidio Chapel, but continued until after the New Year. The performers went from house to house calling upon friends and neighbors giving the play and then receiving gifts and food from the hosts. We have been told that the participants looked forward to this once a year occasion because for many of the poor people that was the one time when they had enough to eat.

One of the first persons to whom they would pay their respects was the chief magistrate of the jurisdiction. Walter Colton, then the Alcalde of Monterey, was saluted on Christmas of 1846, with this festive compliment from the performers. Colton described the occasion:

"The large hall, occupying the center of the building, was sufficiently ample to accommodate them and some 50 ladies and gentlemen as spectators. They brought their own orchestra accompaniment which consisted entirely of violins and guitars. Their prelude had so many sweet harmonies that the listener determined to listen on."

The dialogue and chant of the shepherds would have awakened their appropriate associations but for the obtrusions of the hermit, hunter, and the devil, who now gave much freer scope to their characteristic peculiarities than they did in the church, according to Colton. The hermit forgot his lash was intended for himself, and began to use it on others. The hunter left off snaring birds and commenced setting springs to catch Satan, but his intended victim not only managed to escape but to decoy the hunter himself into his own net. The hermit tried to disenchant him through the power of his missal; but this having no effect, he threatened to chastise the subtle author of the mischief, but wanted someone to seize and hold him, for fear his horns, hoof or tail might come in contact with the life-glass.

During this side-acting, as described by Colton, the dialogue and chant of the shepherds went on, though it would be difficult to conceive of any two things more

wide asunder in the spirit and effect. The whole was concluded with the riata dance by the shepherds, who executed its airy movements with a lightness and precision of step that would have thrown enchantment on any occasion less sacred, in its association than the present.

Nine years later, 1855, the editor of the Monterey Sentinel wrote of Christmas and the local celebration:

"We have had one of the most pleasant Christmas times during the past week, Monterey has had in several years. Our population being mostly Catholic, great preparations were made at the old Presidio Church of Our Lady of Refugio, which for the past 70 years has been the scene of every high religious ceremony in our ancient pueblo.

"On Christmas Eve our zealous cura had the church fitted up in a manner highly creditable to his taste. With a very pleasant forethought of his, as we took it, large piles of wood had been stacked close by the church and set a burning for the double purpose of illumination and warming the gentle during the night, which was bitter cold, with a dry, old-fashioned full moon riding high through a clear sky, unobscured with a single cloud.

"At 12 o'clock midnight people began to flock toward the church to attend the Mass of Chanticleer of San Pedro – or, as the Spanish inhabitants call it – Misa de Galo.

"The Rev. Padre was received by the orchestra, with music from the piano. The ceremony of the mass was done in excellent order and effect; the music and the singing of the service being performed by the new choir of ladies and gentlemen with great credit. There was one, who in high humor, had never known the night so cold, the earth so hard, or his nose so brittle, when it thawed the doctor stitched it up and he is doing very well for a sailor 70 years old."