

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Gift for Dona Angustias

In Gertrude Atherton's "Splendid Idle Forties" there appears a delightful though sad story concerning the lives of Alfred Sully, his bride and her mother, Dona Angustias de la Guerra de Jimeno. The tale has been told and written of many times since it actually occurred in Monterey before the Gold Rush days.

Alfred Sully, son of the famous painter Thomas Sully, was stationed at the Presidio of Monterey in 1846-7. During that year of service he met, loved and married Manuelita Jimeno, the daughter of Dona Angustias.

Thomas Sully wrote his son that he was going to paint something of a religious character for Dona Angustias, knowing that she was a devout Catholic and would appreciate such a work of art. Alfred said nothing to his mother-in-law about this promise, fearing the painting might never be done and knowing her to be very strict about a given promise.

Months passed and one day a man walking on the beach at Monterey saw on the sand a large flat, water-soaked box which had been washed in with the tide. Upon examination, the box was found to bear the name and address of Dona Jimeno. The finder hastened to Don Manuel Jimeno to tell him the news.

Two stout Indians with wheelbarrows were quickly dispatched to the beach with instruction to bring the box to the Jimeno abode – a two-story structure located in back of the present site of the San Carlos Hotel. Within the wooden box, there was another box, one of tin in which a life-size painting of "Christ Blessing Little Children" was found. Not a drop of water had reached the picture. The name of the artist was not on the picture, but Alfred Sully at once recognized his father's work, and produced the letter which his father had written telling him of the plans he had for the gift.

The mystery was partly cleared up when it was learned the box had floated in from a vessel which had been wrecked further up the coast.

Young Alfred Sully was one of the first of the "Troupers of the Gold Coast," for he played at California's First Theater when plays were presented there by the men stationed at the Presidio through the courtesy of the pioneer Jack Swan, the builder.

Thomas Sully, Alfred's father, was born in England in 1783. He lived in the United States from early childhood and studied with a miniature painter and also with Gilbert Stuart. In 1809 he spent several months working under Benjamin West in England. Returning to this country he established himself in Philadelphia as a portraitist.

He again returned to England in 1837 to paint a portrait of Queen Victoria for the Society of the Sons of St. George in Philadelphia. A study of that head, painted from life and very charming, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He also painted portraits of Presidents Jefferson and Monroe, as well as various generals for the Military Academy at West Point. A full length portrait of Lafayette, painted in 1824, hangs in Independence Hall in Philadelphia.