

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 24, 1952

The Passing of An Oak

In the Daily Review published in Pacific Grove on November 16, 1906, we recently came across this item: "The new granite cross which is to mark the landing place of Father Serra at Monterey has arrived.

"It will be unloaded from the car at the depot in the old capital city in a few days. The cross is donated by James Murray, the millionaire, who some years ago purchased the Tevis Hacienda on the waterfront.

"The foundation for the cross was laid several months ago and during the past few days workmen have been engaged in preparing it for the cross. The cross is of granite and is ten feet in length. The base is also of granite and is four feet in height. The inscription at the base reads: "Junipero Serra, 1770." The letters are chiseled out-in bold relief and are polished.

"The old wooden cross which marked the landing place of the Franciscan father was removed several months ago."

A sentimental little touch to the above story came in the Diary a few days ago from Mrs. Louisa Archer Dahlgren, of Monterey and Jamesburg, in the form a small booklet in which the poem "The passing of an Oak" is printed. At the time of the landing of Father Serra on the shores of Monterey, June 3, 1770, there was a large oak tree standing to the left of the entrance to the Monterey Peninsula. Under this tree Father Serra recited the first mass. The granite cross now marks this spot.

The oak tree is described in the foreword of the book, the poem was written by Mary Sullivan Spence, the publisher was Paul Elder & Company, San Francisco; and Mrs. James A Murray had the 12 copies made for private distribution in 1909. The printing—so beautifully done was by the Tomoye Press under the direction of John Henry Nash, now one of the best known designers and printers in the country. As a frontispiece, Isabel Hunter, a prominent water-color artist of the day, made special covers paintings of the old oak, with the tile roofs of Monterey and the blue bay in the background, for each of the 12 copies. The covers were of hand-tooled leather.

The author of "The Passing of An Oak," Mary Sullivan Spence an aunt of Noel Sullivan of Hollow Hills Farm,

Carmel Valley, was the sister of Judge John Sullivan of San Francisco, who was the father of Mr. Sullivan. Mrs. Spence was the wife of Rudolph Spence, the grandson of David and Adelaide Estrada Spence, prominent in the history of Monterey in the middle 1800s, and the son of David Stewart Spence and a descendant of the Malarin family of Monterey.

A quote from the foreword: "Close to the Monterey sea-shore, on the high road between Monterey and Pacific Grove, a little weather-beaten oak stood for a century and a half; renowned in California history as the tree under, which Father Junipero Serra landed and said mass. As it was attacked by the beetle its decay necessitated its removal three years ago (1906). A stone shaft, erected by Mrs. James Murray of Montana, and also of Monterey, marks the spot where it once stood."

Portions of the oak were rescued by the late Harry Greene, and Father Ramon Mestres and placed at the rear of the Royal Presidio chapel above Fremont street, where it may be seen by all who care to make a pilgrimage to pay homage to

There are seven verses in Mrs. Spence's poem, the last two of which we quote here:

Vacancy—where once it rose
Centuries beneath the sky;
Till came one which saw, and chose
That a memory should not die, And a white shaft guards
the fame of a little oak at rest—
Cenotaph that yet shall claim
Kinship with the old world's best;
But for this there would not be (In a world which can
forget),
Aught a memory of that tree;
Thus one rare link of romance,
Golden chain the young world wore,
Slipped by ken of carless glance;
Still—beside the fairest shore;
Measuredly the sentries pace,
Past the old time-haunted space;
Chances steal across time's face,
The old order is not more;
Round the dream-environed place
Fuller life more quickly streams,—
Ah! Old leisure, dying grace,
Must decay touch all our dreams?"