

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 11, 1953

### **Reunion in Guanajuato**

MEXICO – We had a reunion of past and present residents of the Monterey Peninsula in Guanajuato, one of the richest, oldest and most picturesque towns in the Republic. This reunion was held at the “Posada de la Presa,” the hotel-home of Manuel and Felicitas Valenzuela, former residents of Huckleberry Hill in Monterey. Also joining in the reunion were Mrs. Walter C. Adams, Mrs. Charlotte M. Collins, Mrs. Anna Kergan and Mrs. Mabel Loudon, all of Carmel, who are spending the winter in various interesting places in Mexico.

We agree with one writer who declared: “Staying at Posada de la Presa is a restful experience.” Manuel and Felicitas have furnished their small inn with comfort and the added charm given by the subtle use of Mexican handicrafts. The meals are a rare combination of the best from the United States as well as Mexico and Manuel knows his lovely little city so well that his guests may enlarge their knowledge far beyond the usual tourist range.

Guanajuato, pronounced Gwah-nah-hwah-toh, has a population of 23,390, was founded in 1534 and is the capital of the state by the same name. The city is poised high above a great plateau in a narrow mountain gorge. The ground beneath the irregular city is honeycombed, we were told with tunnels and shafts which tap immensely rich deposits of gold and silver ore.

The town is curiously medieval in character, and is an odd blend of old Spanish and new American. The name Guanajuato is an Indian word meaning “Hill of the Frogs,” and Mexican historians agree that this appellation was given to the place because of the large number of frogs which once made the spot their habitation. Guanajuato is considered by many to be a true rival in picturesqueness of that other old town of silver, Taxco. It is at least a good second, in setting and in its romantic appearance, and is so far not a tourists' mecca as is her sister city. The central plaza is Mexico in miniature and with a somewhat incongruous touch of classicism in the imposing modern Juarez theater with its columned portico, and huge lions guarding the entrance.

Space is at a premium in the narrow valley, and so Plaza Mayor is the smallest central square of any city in Mexico. Most of the streets in Guanajuato, as in Taxco, are of cobble stones, winding up steep hills, very often so steep that stair steps have been necessary, and are declared “one way” thoroughfares. There is one fascinating street, which all visitors must see “Kiss Alley,” (Callejon del Beso) so named because of its narrowness, fancifully enabling the houses, not to mention their residents, to kiss across it

Little, it appears, has been done to detract from the city's colonial atmosphere. The Spanish influence is noticeable in its buildings, but because Andalusians were among the early arrivals in Guanajuato, there is also a Moorish touch to some of the ancient buildings. The city is also noted as the birthplace of Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican painter.

High on a mountain overlooking all of Guanajuato is the statue of Pipila, immortalizing Jose Barajas, an early hero of Mexico's War for Freedom from Spain. The statue may be seen for miles as one approaches or leaves this fascinating city.

Manuel, our host, took us on a delightful tour of Guanajuato during our stay in his Posada. Among the most interesting and beautiful of the places we visited was the Hacienda de Barrera, an ancient baronial home restored and exquisitely furnished with antiques by its owner, Francisco Armada, a shipping merchant of Mexico City who uses the house and extensive gardens as his summer residence.