

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Mother Lode Country

A program, from the California History Foundation of the College of the Pacific, at Stockton, received in the mail a few weeks ago enticed us to make the motor trip which took us away from Monterey recently for a few days of vagabonding in the Mother Lode Country. The fascinating journey ended at Stockton where we attended the Sixth Annual Institute of California History Foundation held, March 13, and 14—a truly inspirational gathering of members of historical societies throughout the State of California.

Assuming for the moment that we were out-of-state tourists we stopped for a glimpse of San Juan Bautista, talked with the curator of the State Monument there, and admired the mission church, the old hotel, the Castro house, as well as the Zanetta Mansion and the hugh stable with its collection of ancient vehicles and other old time equipment. I was a beautiful day, and we were thankful that this example of a typical early California landmark had been saved for posterity.

We were on our way to Hornitos, one of the important communities of the Gold Rush era which we had not visited on previous excursions into this historic country. This now almost extinct town is reached via a side road from Mt. Bullion and Bear Valley. It was founded by Mexicans only a few months after Marshall's discovery of gold. The Spanish name, meaning "little ovens," derives, according to one report, from the doomed stone and mud tombs whose remnants may still be seen on the hill above the remains of the once thriving community.

Among the most interesting structures are the old Wells Fargo building, which is now a Native Sons' hall, with a brick front and quarried schist walls built in 1851, the Masonic Lodge (1860) of similar construction and with a limestone flagging which came from nearby rock exposures, the D. Ghirardelli store (1855) made of dressed schist blocks. This building we are told was the dance hall and saloon patronized by the notorious bandit, Joaquin Murietta, who used, in emergencies, an escape tunnel running from the dance hall under the road, with its exit in another adobe building. However we did not see this tunnel, but according to the Geologic Guidebook along Highway 49," its existence is known fact.

The tunnel measured two by three feet and the remnants of the adobe "blind" may still be seen. The schist for the several stone-mud mortar buildings was quarried in the center of the town. Hornitos contains a number of adobe buildings (a features emphasizing its Mexican aspect) whose preservation varies from complete structures to weathered remnants of walls.

It might be revealing here to describe the schist and its use in the buildings of the Mother Lode. Talc schist, or soapstone as it is known there, was occasionally employed in its rough form in rubble walls of buildings or used as ornamental facing material and window archings. Experts declare that it is surprising that a stone which is so easily worked and so resistant to heat, and weathering, was not used more extensively.

In the early days Hornitos had a population of over a thousand in habitants. It was known as the richest and toughest of the Mother Lode communities. It was here that many of the religious customs of old Mexico were enacted for over 50 years. The Ghirardelli family was established there for over 50 years, and it was in Hornitos that they acquired the finances to establish a business which has become known throughout the United States and abroad. They still own the property and ruins of the once large and handsome building, in which the firm was first established, and upon which there is a bronze plaque with date, and history of the establishment.