

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Father Francisco Garces

A news item appearing in a Southern California paper recently brought back to memory my October visit in Queretaro, Mex. The item concerned the results of a bit of research and the findings of Clarence Cullimore, author of books on California history and instructor in Kern County Union High School, who claims to have found the last resting place of Father Francisco Garces, pioneer and explorer of California who was the first white man to enter the San Joaquin Valley. The place of rest for the venerable priest is in Queretaro.

Queretaro is a colonial city of rare charm. It is the capital city of the state by the same name. Motoring from the South on the All-American highway, the city is first seen in a valley at the foot of a long hill called Sangremal. As one drives through and around the city, the population of which is about 50,000 people, the charm of the flower-filled plazas, the markets, the quaint old houses, the numerous churches and ancient government buildings make the traveler wish to linger longer. The old Spanish aqueduct is another of the absorbing interests of the city.

Here in Queretaro was the headquarters of the Franciscan Monks of the Propagation of the Faith, whose members spread throughout Central America and to California establishing the Franciscan Missions. Here were formed plans for national independence, and here the Emperor Maximilian was shot on June 18, 1867.

It was in Queretaro that Clarence Cullimore met Father Leopoldo Campos OFM, of the College of Santa Cruz, who assisted him in conducting an on-the-spot research to establish the fact of the martyr's burial there in 1794.

The Bakersfield writer also has in his possession a portrait of Father Garces, copied from an original at the college, where the padre was once an instructor before he began his explorations of upper Mexico and California.

Father Garces, a Franciscan missionary, led the first Anza expedition through the trailless desert of Sonora and Arizona to San Gabriel in 1775, and subsequently entered the San Joaquin Valley, blazing a new trail to San Francisco.

He was slain in a massacre on the banks of the Colorado River near the present site of Yuma, Ariz., in 1781, and his body lay buried in California soil where he was killed. Later his remains were moved by muleback, according to Cullimore's research to Tubutama, Mex., some 500 miles southward, where they were placed beneath the church floor on the gospel side of the altar.

There some historians leave him, but Cullimore points out that recent investigations and a study of Tubutama church archives substantiate the assertion that the remains of Padre Garces were moved a second time, the last time, 1,200 miles south to Queretaro, in 1794, and interred at his old College of Santa Cruz, under the altar.

Cullimore was assisted in his research by the Mexican government, which made many documents available, as well as providing photographs of the little-known portrait of the pioneer priest.

There is in Queretaro a monastery adjoining the Church of San Francisco which dates from 1545, a museum known as the Museum Pio Mariano, where there are on display huge parchment choir books, paintings, many books and other items of historical interest. In the library are 8,000 books, most of them parchment tomes of the 17th and 18th century. It was probably here that Cullimore obtained much of his documentary evidence as to the final resting place of Father Garces.

James Culleton writes in his book "Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey" that Don Juan Bautista de Anza reached Monterey on April 18, 1774. He had with him Fray Juan Diaz of the Queretaro Franciscans, 20 Sonora soldiers and two San Gabriel guards. Six Monterey soldiers accompanied him when he left on April 22nd to retrace his march, that they might learn the road as far as the Colorado River. It was believed that the route might come in handy for the mail.