

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 26, 1954

Loneliest of the Missions

The ground was blessed and the first spade of dirt was turned yesterday on the site of Mission Nuestra Senora de Soledad, when the Native Daughters of the Golden West began the restoration of the historic old mission near the town of Soledad in southern Monterey County. Mission Soledad was the 13th in the chain of missions and is the last to be restored.

The religious significance of the founding of the Mission Soledad on October 9, 1791 by Father President Fermin de Lausen is related in his diary.

"... On this day, I with the assistance of the Rev. Fathers and Preachers Apostolic Father Buenaventura Sitjar, missionary of the Mission of San Antonio de Padua, and Father Diego Garcia destined for this mission blessed water and the site and the great Cross which we planted and venerated ... This place, then is constituted a mission dedicated in honor of the Most Sorrowful Mystery of Solitude of Most Holy Mary, Our lady..."

A little more than two months later, a baptism was administered "In the church of the mission," on Dec. 25, 1791.

During the first year and one half, the front wing of the quadrangle was constructed and 115 entries had been made in the baptismal book.

Overcoming numerous obstacles, Soledad had an Indian population of 688 in 1805. In the same year Father Ybanez and Antonio Jayme reported that the church edifice had been considerably enlarged.

In 1832 Father Vicente Sarria who had retired to Soledad a virtual prisoner after refusing to swear allegiance to the Mexican government, reported that a provisional church building had been erected to replace the first one, which had collapsed because of floods. It is this more recent structure that the Native Daughters plan to restore under the supervision of Harry Downie, mission curator of the diocese.

Secularization followed almost immediately after Father Sarria made his 1832 report and the saintly priest died on May 24, 1835, an ill and broken man. Grieving Indians bore his body to San Antonio de Padua for burial before the altar of that mission.

Although mission lands were confiscated and sold to private citizens under Mexican rule, the American government returned them to the Catholic church in 1858. Lonely and deserted, Soledad has remained the only one of the 21 missions unrestored.

Mrs. Raymond M. Giannini of San Francisco, Mission Soledad Restoration committee chairman, is being assisted in this activity by past grand presidents Mrs. Andrew C. Thuesen of San Francisco, Miss Grace S. Stoermer of Los Angeles, Miss Henrietta Toothaker of Woodlands, and Mrs. Clyde Dyke of Pacific Grove. Others are Miss Rose Rhyner, Salinas; Miss Maria Antonia Field, Monterey; Miss Emily Welch, San Diego; Mrs. Charles Thaler, grand secretary of Oakland and Mrs. Alphonse B. Fages of Pomona, State press chairman.

The executive advisory committee includes Most Rev. Aloysius J. Willinger, bishop of Monterey and Fresno; under whose auspices the restoration is being planned. Hon. Joseph R. Knowland and Dr. Peter T. Conmy, Oakland; John H. Hoefer, Frank Freethy, and H.S. Welfield of San Francisco; Miss Gerrish, Mrs. Thaler, Mrs. Thuesen and Miss Field.