

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

January 24, 1955

What Is Adobe?

In 1882 an unknown correspondent wrote an article for Harper's New Monthly Magazine describing California as he viewed it.

Evidently our author was greatly impressed by Monterey, for he devoted several columns to his personal experiences here. This paragraph may be of interest:

"As seen from a distance, scattered loose and white on the forest-crested slope of the fine crescent-shaped bay of Monterey, the little city, which has now perhaps 2,000 inhabitants, hardly shows at once its real dissimilarity to other places. But when entered, it is found to consist almost exclusively of whitewashed adobe houses, and straggling mud-covered adobe walls, forming enclosures, known as 'corrals,' for animals and the like. Plenty of them are abandoned, and at frequent intervals are encountered some abandoned old adobe barracks, or government house, or military prison of historic fame, with its whitewash gone, holes in its walls, and some bits of broken grating and balcony hanging aimlessly from it, only waiting for the first opportunity to let go."

Then it is fun to read what the correspondent of 1882 found out about adobe brick, how it was made and how it was used, and in our humble opinion he did very well with his investigation and description, so we will repeat this paragraph as he wrote it:

"The travelers of my youth, I recollect, had a fashion of talking glibly of adobe, without ever explaining what adobe is. Let me not be guilty any longer of the same fault. Adobe is a building material used in the same manner as brick. It is brick, only dried in the sun, and not baked. Walls are made of great thickness of it in order that, even though the outside and inside crumble off, there may be a good deal left. Like a number of other things, it stands very well while it is not assailed; and in this climate it is supposed, with reason, that it is rarely assailed by any violent extremes in temperature."

The author goes on to explain that the typical adobe house of the best class is stuccoed and whitewashed, large on the ground, two stories in height, with verandas. Again, it is of but one story, and has an interior courtyard. It has green doors and shutters, so

he writes, and green turned posts in what should be called, (in 1882), Queen Anne style, and is a comfortable and home-like edifice to look at.

The next paragraph in the story of Monterey in 1882 we will quote from Harper's:

"One of them (adobes) — whither I was taken to see the first piano ever introduced into California, and to call upon a lady whose husband had made a haste to sell out all his property in San Francisco and invest it here, in order to reap the prosperity thought to be waiting upon Monterey at an early date—has two old iron guns planted as posts at the corners. In front of others are walks neatly made of the vertebrae of whales. The whales are taken by the Monterey Whaling Co., a band of hardy, weather beaten men, chiefly Portuguese from the Azores. They have a lookout station on the hill under the ruined fort, a barracks lower down, and pursue their avocation from the shore in boats, with plenty of adventure and no small profit."

Monterey, which in 1882 was not even the county seat, but which was the Spanish capital of the province from the time it was first thought necessary to have a capital, after the landing here of Father Serra and Portola in 1770. It was next a Mexican capital under 11 successive governors. Then it became the American capital, the first port of entry, the scene of the first constitutional convention of the State of California, and an outfitting point for the mines in Gold Rush days.

At this point let us take up the story as told in Harper's in 1882:

"Money in these days was so plentiful, as I have heard tell, that storekeepers hardly stopped to count it, but threw it under the counter by the bushel-basketful. A secret belief in some ultimate revival and recovery of prestige seems always to have survived in certain quarters, corresponding, as it were, to that of the reappearance of Barbarossa from the Kylfhauser Berg, or the restoration of the Jews to Palestine. Breakwaters are ambitiously talked of, to make the bay a harbor, and the town a shipping point and a rival of San Francisco."

Another sentence will be of interest: "The quaint town is always here; so are the wild rocks with the gossiping family of sea gulls and pelicans and the romantic drives through extensive forests of pine and cypress."