

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Christmas In Old Monterey

The following description of a typical California Christmas in the days before the American conquest, appeared in the Californian Illustrated Magazine—a short-lived but imposing publication—in 1892. The author, Artura Bandini, was a son of Juan Bandini, who came to California from Peru in 1820, and was one of the most prominent ranchers and citizens of the period.

“Navidad! Pasquas! Noche Buena! Christmas! What memories of good old times gone, never to return, must the above words bring back to the minds of old Californians. Noche Buena meant to us jollity in the full sense of the word, but with some religious thoughts as well. With all the uproarious fiestas and racket, the thought that to the world was born a Savior, was not forgotten, and the great event was kept in the mind of the people by the continuous and merry ringing of the bells. For us ‘muchachos’ and the younger folks, however, the Vispera de Navidad, or Christmas Eve, was the day of great excitement and expectations. I remember how a lot of us would get on the roof of our large adobe house to watch for the arrival of the different great rancheros escorting each his individual gaily decorated arreta (ox-cart) which contained his family. What canopies these humble conveyances carried! Great silken bedspreads, worked with the most beautiful flowers, the fringe serving as a screen and reaching to the axle. Others had coverings of gay rebosos, China crepe, and lace curtains, with flowers and figures embroidered in vivid colors. And the escorts: how shall I describe the trappings of the gallant horse and his still gallant rider, and not be charged with exaggeration? Fortunately, I know many, both Americans and Spanish-Americans, that can corroborate my statements.

“The costume of the early Californians was picturesque and serviceable; for riding, especially, it was most appropriate; the short, graceful jacket, beautifully embroidered in silver and gold, the trousers snug at the seat, but expanding from thigh to ankle; the side seams being open, the wearer, if he so preferred, could bring them together by means of silver buttons or clasps in the shape of tiny shells: underneath all this was snowy ‘calzonsillo,’ or riding drawers. Others used knee-breeches and ‘botas,’ a species of leggings worn to

protect the lower part of the leg. On the ‘bota’ the embroiderer used her greatest ingenuity to show it to the best advantage; indeed, the early Californian was more particular about the beauty of this article than almost any other part of his dress. The ‘bota’ was wrapped two or three times around the leg and fastened at the top by a wide and tasseled garter. As in the middle ages, some knights carried to extreme the length of their pointed shoes, even to the extent of attaching the end of their girdles; so, did some of the early Californians with the cords and tassels of their ‘botas,’ the ends of which would touch the ground.”

Luxury, it is said, leads to effeminacy; if such is the case, it had no effect on the Californians, for a hardier race of men could not be found the world over. As for their fight-qualities no less a competent judge than Kit Carson said, that “they were hard to beat.”

“In those days, the people always rode good horses; but for the Christmas fiestas they used the very best and most showy of their numberless herds—satin mouths, and feet that barely touched the earth, worthy descendants of the Arabian Alboraks, light of limb, and eye of fire, devourers of miles and leagues, tireless, indomitable. Newcomers think not what you call or rather spell, ‘bronco,’ wild, (unbroken) is his true descendant. No, what you now meet and see is the hybrid off-spring of a nameless race.

“The trappings also must befit the horse. Imagine a black or red saddle, according to the taste of the rider, the leather most artistically stamped in flowers or embroidered with silver threads, the pommel and seat lined with silver, and often being of the solid metal itself, a snowy or jet black ‘anquera,’ (saddle blanket), descending halfway to the ground. The headstall and reins heavily mounted, even more.

“Some families that I could name never used an inch of leather on the last-mentioned pieces but had them composed of pure silver filagree work with gold slides and mountings. The rider that indulged in all this luxury became it well. He bestrode his steed with the proud consciousness of being the horseman par excellence of the world, while his animal plunged and coiled as if to show and prove himself worthy of the burden that he bore. Such were some of the sights of olden California.”