

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Los Pastores (The Shepherds)

In 1892 there appeared in the Californian Illustrated Magazine an entertaining article by Arturo Bandini, the son of Juan Bandini, who came to California from Peru in 1820, and became one of the foremost ranchers and citizens of the time. Arturo describes a typical California Christmas in the days before the American conquest. The magazine which featured the article was short lived but a truly imposing publication.

The story of the "Los Pastores" has been repeated over and over again but like many of the old times tales, each year it bears repeating at this season for it was truly Monterey. Bandini writes: "Gaily decorated and festooned carretas, prancing horses, and splendid horsemen were a common sight for us, but the 'Pastores' — Ah! that was something that occurred but once a year during 'Navidad' — Christmas time. Los Pastores, (The Shepherds) is a species of sacred drama, something like the Passion Play, the principal characters were the Archangel Michael, the devil, a lazy, clownish individual, named Bartolo, and Shepherds. Of these personages, the ones most admired by the boys, the rabble in the general, were, first, the devil; then St. Michael. The former was patterned after the most approved pictures of his Satanic majesty to be found in the old church — horns, tail, cloven hoof, etc.

"The pastores went from house to house enacting the same scenes. The first act, if I may call it so, represented the shepherds watching their flocks by night. The second was the appearance of an angel announcing the birth of Christ and commanding them to go and adore Him. Meanwhile the devil was using sarcasm and endeavoring in every way to keep the pastores away from going. The lazy Bartolo, lying on his sheepskin, was cracking jokes which the crowd received with marks of the greatest approval and merriment. The third was the scene in the stable, the Infant, Mary, and Joseph being invisible. The part most enjoyed by the spectators, the boys in particular, was when the pastores sallied into the street; there and then the angel and the devil crossed swords, and a seeming combat a l'outrance began. As a matter of course, the fiend was soon put hors de combat, much to the edification of the pious ones, but to the great chagrin of us boys, who looked on him as the principal hero of the day. "Our confidence

and admiration were soon restored, however, for, on rising to his feet, the fiend would select some young active looking Indian in the crowd and rush at him with a blood-curdling screech, "Lo" could not stand this and would light out for dear life, superstitious fear adding wings to his feet. Then began the greatest and most uproarious chase on record, the Indians urging on their man with shrill whoops, while the boys encouraged their hero in the most approved and animated manner. The principal ground for this famous struggle was the plaza, or around the church. "Lo" being afraid to retire from the immediate protection of the crowd. At last, the pursuer would get near enough to strike at his quarry with the flat of his sword. The Indian, in despair, would then stop, draw his knife, and show fight, and the chase was ended; the devil not meeting aboriginal St. Michael. These pastores were huge feeders. At every house they visited, they were treated to bunuelos - sweetened cakes fried crisp in grease. Bunuelos are to most early Californians, always associated with old-time Christmas festivities and pastores.

"Let not the reader imagine that scenery or other stage effects accompanied the pastores — quite to the contrary; everything was of the crudest sort. The favorite spot for these strolling actors was the courtyard, the usual appendage of an early California residence. Taking a lot of candle-wicking, and placing it in large vessels filled with melted tallow, the actors would place these on different parts of the adobe wall, and fire them and the lights for the performance were ready. It was quite a weird scene to see by the dim and smoky light of the primitive torches, the grotesque figures going through their different acts.

"Many privileges had the pastores of old, such as the invading of the patios, (courtyards) and even the residences of the highest people in the land. Wherever they went, they were sure of good treatment, and sometimes very liberal largesse."