

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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New Almaden

One number in the recently issued Keepsake series of the Book Club of California is the story of a painting illustrating the "Blessing of the Enrequita Mine, New Almaden" by Alexander Edouardt, 1859. The original painting is a treasure from the Society of California Pioneers, selected for the series by Helen S. Giffen, the secretary of the society.

A very fine reproduction of the painting picturing the blessing, held on the hillside at New Almaden, is enclosed in the folder. Miss Giffen expresses in the text her belief that the pioneer artist's depiction of early California scenes and events has bequeathed a rich visual heritage to the historian. Edouardt was an active painter in California from 1858 to 1892. He was not only skilled with the brush, but a printer and photographer as well, and his efforts in all three mediums may be found in brochures and books as well as on the walls of galleries and museums.

His canvas "Blessing the Enrequita Mine" delineates one of the colorful ceremonies traditionally held before miners of Spanish-speaking communities would feel safe in entering the shaft. This painting may be seen in the Society of California Pioneers museum on McAllister street in San Francisco, to which visitors are always welcome.

The New Almaden quicksilver mines situated in the valley of Guadalupe Creek, 12 miles from San Jose, have a history that dates back to the Spanish occupation of California. They were for many years the largest producers of quicksilver in the country and derived their name from the mines in Spain. When, in 1859, the Enrequita mine (named for the daughter of the superintendent of the mines) was opened for production, it was Alexander Edouardt who preserved the event on canvas. He presented the ceremony in glowing colors that retain their freshness after almost a century, and vividly portray the dramatic action of the occasion, in the opinion of the writer of the text of the California Book Club's Keepsake.

The picture is full of vigor and movement. The entrance to the mine is indicated in the hillside behind the altar, where, under a brush shelter, Fr. Goetz of San Jose is conducting the dedicatory mass. Kneeling before the

altar are a group of miners, while dominating the foreground are a lady and gentleman. undoubtedly intended to be the mine superintendent and his wife, followed by a young lady carrying a parasol, who, we suppose, was the daughter for whom the mine was named. Enrequita Laurencel. There is also a dog watching the men who are preparing a mound of firecrackers to be set off at the close of the religious ceremonies.

The whole picture appears to be bathed in sunshine, as the community of Almaden usually is.

As one enters the town of New Almaden there is a marker placed before the road by the New Almaden Historical Society which reads: "First Mining Operations in California. Mining began in 1824 and the mines have been in constant production since 1845. Over one million flasks of quicksilver, valued in excess of 50 million dollars, have been produced."

In an article published in 1853, the author told of another religious service held in the small mountain community: "I attended the morning prayer of the miners in the subterranean chapel in the interior of the mine, before an altar of the Virgin, cut out of solid rock. (Their prayer was the same as that of the boatmen on the San Juan river and the Lake of Nicaragua, which I had heard in 1850). It was a song addressed to the Virgin, the strain of plaintive notes in a few simple but most expressive modulations. . . .

"By the light of a torch, we passed through a damp passage of the same length, a sudden turn brings us into a vestibule, where, in a niche at one side is placed a crude shrine of the tutelary saint, or protectress of the mine-Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, before which lighted candles are kept constantly burning, and before entering upon the labors of the day or night each man visits this shrine in devotion."

The community of New Almaden gives one the feeling of serenity - it is peaceful and quiet. Many of the little old houses, all alike, which line the street on the left as you enter the town, have been purchased from the original mine company and are now vacation homes. The trees which line the street are old and beautiful and the gardens are well kept. There is a very good and attractive museum there which all who go to Almaden should certainly visit. The exhibits are well arranged and give an authentic history of the mines and the workers who lived there.