

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Villagra's 'Historia'

Dr. George P. Hammond, director of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, chose Gaspar de Villagra's "Historia de la Nueva Mexico" as the treasure of the library when asked to furnish one and to write the text for California Book Club's series of 12 "Treasures of California Collections" to be sent to the members of the club during 1956.,

A facsimile of the title page and the first page of the text decorates the inside page of the folder, accompanied by Dr. Hammond's remarks as to its history. The cover is illustrated with a drawing of the portrait of Gaspar de Villagra. The whole is an excellent example of the printer's skill of today and his remarkable ability to copy the beauty of the old type, the drawings, and the paper yellowed with age.

Today it is our privilege to let Dr. Hammond tell the story of his choice for the treasure in the Bancroft Library:

"Assuming that it is possible to distinguish one member of a family of books from the rest, to designate it as standing head and shoulders above all its relatives on the shelves of a specialized institution like the Bancroft Library, I would today choose Gaspar de Villagra's "Historia de la Nueva Mexico," published in Alcala, Spain, 1610, as the object of my special affection. It stands as one of the earliest items of Americana, antedating even the landing of the Pilgrims in New England. It is a history, in verse, of the beginnings of a state in the American union.

"The Spanish Pioneers who founded New Mexico, of whom Villagra was one, had been attracted to that remote area by the discovery of the new lands, supposedly as rich as Mexico itself. Enlisting in 1595 under the banner of Don Juan de Onate, the governor and captain-general, they reached New Mexico, on foot and horse, three years later, and established their first capital at San Juan, called San Juan de los Caballeros, in commemoration of their work as pioneers. Later, in 1610, they moved to a safer spot, Santa Fe, on the banks of the Santa Fe River, and made it their permanent capital. Here they built the Palace of the Governors, famous ever since as the offices of

government, and soon erected a church, San Miguel, which they still see on the same site.

"The Indians up until this time had accepted the visiting white men with dignity and forbearance, had given them food and clothing, and had sworn allegiance to the Spanish God and King. But soon the Indians challenged the Spaniards, ready to test their strength and weapons against the forces of the now gods, Acoma was the site of this strange contest.

"This 'sky city' sprawls on a high mesa 70 acres in extent, towering a good 400 feet above the surrounding plain. Its inhabitants had sworn fealty to the Spaniards in the first autumn of 1598, but when, Captain Juan de Zaldivar came a second time to ask for supplies of food and clothing, the Indians suddenly rebelled, slew the captain and a dozen of his companions, and threatened the destruction of every Spaniard in New Mexico.

"The 'Historia' of Villagra is an account of what took place when the Spaniards, some 70 strong, went back to subdue the 'Sky City' and to restore it to allegiance to Spain. Villagra fought throughout the three days of furious battle, in which Acoma was crushed and its people made captives. He returned to Spain after the victorious campaign, satisfied to give up the sword for the pen, to chronicle the events of this Homeric struggle.

"Villagra wrote in verse, in imitation of Virgil's 'Aeneid.' It is an authentic record, told by a participant, often with many a rhetorical flourish."

This history is a small octavo volume, measuring approximately 3 7/8 by 5 1/2 inches. It has a title page, leaf with a portrait of Villagra, 22 unnumbered leaves of preliminaries, 287 numbered leaves, and a page of colophon. The little volume is excessively rare - less than a dozen copies are known to exist today. The copy in the Bancroft Library was purchased by Hubert Howe Bancroft in 1870 from a notable collector, Henry Stevens of Vermont, father of the famous Henry Stevens of London.