

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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'The City of History'

I have been visiting San Juan Bautista for many years but never did I appreciate its beauty, quietness and sympathetic restoration more than I did on a recent Sunday afternoon.

The San Benito County Chamber of Commerce has named San Juan Bautista "The City of History." In the opinion of the membership it is a jewel in a perfect setting. In it is one of the few places where oldest California history, in a most scenic setting, is undisturbed by turbulent, modern times, and where history joins hands with the present.

We agreed with all these statements when we stood at the end of the plaza and looked at the mission on the right, the Zanetta House and old stable at the left, the Castro Adobe and the old Plaza Hotel in front of us. The State Division of Beaches certainly deserves an abundance of credit for the care they have given this charming place.

One may stand in the quiet old plaza in the little city of San Juan Bautista and fold back the years to early California days. My companion on this Sunday afternoon said just these words as we stood overlooking the plaza and, turning around, gazed over toward Hollister and the beautiful valley, still unspoiled by commercialism.

Time has softened and mellowed the charm of the venerable structures in the city, and the visitor can readily see the picture of life that went on here nearly a century and a half ago. It is undisturbed by turbulent, modern times and here history joins hands with the present, as it does nowhere else to our belief.

The San Juan Bautista State Historical Monument was incorporated into the California State Park System in 1933 through the efforts of the San Juan Preservation League and the State Park Commission. The buildings are preserved as monuments because of State-wide historical interest and are open to the public for the enjoyment of all. They enclose the plaza on two sides and represent a cross-section of architecture up to 1900.

The plaza is surrounded by locust trees and was originally an open space that gradually became enclosed with buildings. Here were the parade grounds

arid the setting for the early-day bull-and-bear fights. This area is one of the few remaining old plazas in California.

The Plaza Hotel was built about 1813, after the completion of the Mission, as a new barracks-headquarters for the Spanish soldiers stationed there to protect the Franciscan padres and the Indians who had joined them in building the mission church.

Angelo Zanetta added a second story of redwood and opened the Plaza Hotel in 1858. The hotel became famous for its excellent food and accommodations and was one of the main stops of the Coast Line Stage between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The Zanetta House stands on the site of a building built in 1815 to house unmarried Indian girls and women. It is a two-story adobe building, now a bit modernized, with a large courtyard at the rear. It is said that after the mission period the adjoining building was used as headquarters by the cavalymen of General Castro. Zanetta acquired the building, and in 1868 tore down the remains, and with the good adobe built the two outer walls of the present building.

The Castro House next to the Plaza Hotel was built in 1840, when the community was chosen as the capital of the First District, which extended from San Luis Obispo to Sonoma, and Jose Castro was appointed as Prefect of the District. He had this two-story adobe erected to house, the secretary of the district and headquarters for himself.

Castro sold the building to Patrick Breen in 1848. The Breens were survivors of the Donner-Reed party which was caught in the Sierras during the winter of 1846. This building is considered one of the finest examples of Spanish-California architecture.

We were fascinated with the old livery stable, erected in 1874 and known as the Plaza Stable, it operated in connection with the Plaza Hotel. The town was an important trading center, and mining men, cattle and sheep buyers would stop at the hotel to rent a horse and buggy for a business trip around the surrounding country.

The San Juan Eagle Fire Wagon, the Tres Pinos-New Idria Stage, and a variety of buggies and wagons were housed in the stables. To the rear were the blacksmith and wagonwright shops, an important industry in the

early days of San Juan. They are still there today for visitors to see.

We are told by the ranger in charge that the surreys, buggies, stages and wagons which we had seen in the stables, along with the other restored vehicles, had been the work of the prisoners at the Soledad prison. The men must have had an interesting project - even to putting the "figure on top" of the fashionable surrey.