

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Gift of a House

In Mallorca, the home island of Father Junipero Serra, off the coast of Spain, the spirit of change is almost non-existent. As countries go, it is very old. Buildings everywhere seem to belong to another age, we have been told by those who have visited there. Yet in these time-warped surroundings there dwelt men whose outlook on life was thoroughly modern. Such a group, 17 in number, founded a Rotary Club in Palma, the capital in 1927.

As usual with men of goodwill, they were a cross-section of the business and professional life of Mallorca. Looking in 1931 for an outlet for their zeal for service they could recall with satisfaction how their club had recently presented a plaque to the Guasp Press, the oldest press in continuous operation in all Europe. Soon the Guasp Press would be a museum.

Ernest Ingold, a past president of San Francisco Rotary Club, wrote in his 1950 book on the club in Palma; "But this civic gesture was only a prelude to the ambitious plan they were now considering, the plan of finding and preserving the birthplace of Junipero Serra. He was born in Petra, 25 miles from Palma, ranks as one of the greatest men born in Mallorca and was one of the chief links between his native Spain and his beloved California."

Miguel Jose Serra was born Nov. 24, 1713, son of Antonio Serra and Margarita Ferrer. When he was 16, Serra entered the Franciscan order. Graduating with a doctorate in theology, his preaching soon won him fame.

But he decided that his work called him to a virgin land and new souls. In 1749 his fate was fulfilled; he embarked at Palma for the New World. He was 99 days in passage from Palma to Veracruz, in Mexico. For nine years he toiled in the missions of Mexico before being appointed president of the missions. Finally, in 1767, he was sent as father-president to the missions of California.

As part of the Mallorcan heritage, the story of Junipero Serra was well known to the Rotary of Palma. So at the meeting of Dec. 3, 1931, President Eusebio Pascual Casanovas was able to outline the Rotary project. The

house in which Junipero Serra was born had been located in Petra and identified beyond a doubt.

It was small, measuring 77 feet by 33 feet. It was unoccupied, tumbled down, and used as a corral, but it was the place where Miguel's mother, in a fine Spanish phrase, had "given light" to her famous son.

So it was proposed that as an International Service project, the Rotary Club of Mallorca should buy this house, restore it and present it to the far-distant city of San Francisco "to erect an imperishable bridge of friendship between Spain and California."

The plan was announced in December, and Palma was to be the host to the conference of its Rotary District. The man entrusted to the restoration, as reported by Ingold in his book, "The House in Mallorca," was Guillermo Forteza Pina, a notable architect of refined taste, who was a past president of the club and former mayor of Palma. On that December day the secretary, Rafael Ramis, summed up the spirit of these 23 Rotarians when he said: "Although this purchase represents a sacrifice for the club, it has been joyfully undertaken for that distant land of California."

With that Spanish sense of protocol, the club determined to make the offer through the California Historical Society, which replied: "The Mayor (of San Francisco) will meet our committee...we will gladly accept responsibility."

The formal offer was made March 1, 1932, at the office of San Francisco's mayor, Rotarian Angelo J. Rossi. A committee of five from the California Historical Society transmitted a letter which read: "The Rotary Club of Mallorca respectfully requests that you in your official capacity accept a gift conveying the birthplace of Father Junipero Serra in the village of Petra in Mallorca...to perpetuate the memory and magnificent work of our distinguished countryman..."

"It is further our wish that the City of San Francisco named for the patron saint of Junipero Serra's order, be perpetual holder of the title...without financial obligation either at the time of transfer or thereafter. It is intended to make a museum of the building..."

Mayor Rossi answered the letter from the Mallorca Club and wrote to his friend and former San Franciscan Juan Cervera Cebrian, in Madrid, asking him to journey in May and there be the official representative of San

Francisco at the presentation. He graciously accepted the honor.