

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Cannery Row and Coloma

The December issue of "Westways," the publication of the Department of Insurance of the Automobile Club of Southern California, has included a short article on "Renaissance at Cannery Row" in Monterey. The photographs are by J. R. Lewis and picture several important business firms which have been added to Cannery Row since the sardines disappeared in such great number from the ocean and made the huge canneries' non-profitable.

Lewis ends his short story, accompanying the eight photographs, with this comment: "There are still a few characters around but even they are different from those of John Steinbeck, who made the row famous. Instead of the unemployed and unemployable, there are movers, truck drivers, waiters, and seasonal cannery workers.

"But the warm sun still shines, and the black cypress trees still stand, and Cannery Row, though cosmopolitan now, is full of memories that will never change,"

The city recently made the name authentic for now the street markers bear the black letters "Cannery Row."

Almost everyone knows that the first discovery of gold in California was made along the American River on Jan. 24, 1848, by James W. Marshall. But, as to the name of the community which sprang up at the site - from whence did it originate?

Is Coloma the Spanish name of a fragrant flower nodding on the sunny slopes of California, as some folks have thought, or is it a bloom that is borne in the rocky heights of the lofty Andes in South America? Could it be the name of a Spanish grandee or a Peruvian viceroy who yesterday swaggered across the pages of the western hemisphere's early history?

Apparently, there is ground for belief in all of the explanations and yet proof does not lend its weight enough to any to tip the scales to the side of fact.

Perhaps it is the flower lovers who cherish the belief that Coloma designates a flower. First the flower is thought to be a native of California. Then next it yields its fragrance to the Andes. But our interest lies in the hopes that it is a Spanish flower. Oddly enough no

Spanish dictionary that we have been able to study today shows the word Coloma in connection with any flower. In fact, dictionaries do not seem to recognize the word.

Alphonzo de Coloma distinguished himself as a Peruvian general. Maybe Coloma was named for him. He lived from 1804 to 1850, during the time when the flames of revolution swept across the holdings of old Spain in South America. Did a son of the old general of Peru come northward to old Mexico, and inspired by the legends of gold set forth for the mysterious lands to the north - finally coming to California?

In a small book published in 1955 by the American Trust Co. and written by Thomas P. Brown, we have found this definition of Coloma - "Coh-loh-mah - derived from Koloma, a Nishinan Indian tribe."

Nellie Van de Griff Sanchez also gives Coloma the same meaning in her "Spanish and Indian Place Names in California." She writes: "Coloma, a town in Eldorado County, so named from the Koloma tribe, a division of the Nishinan family."

A publication of the University of California, "1,000 California Place Names," edited by Edwin G. Gudde, has this to report: "Coloma, Developed around Sutter's Mill after the discovery of gold in January 1848. It was named after a Maidu Indian village and was recorded as 'Culloma' In the New Helvetia Diary, March 17, 1848."

Most writers of California history do not attempt to solve the mystery of the name of Coloma but are satisfied to name the place as the site of discovery of gold, so how can we arrive at any satisfactory solution?