

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Monterey 'Hanging'

One hundred years ago last Feb. 21, the breaking of a hangman's rope saved the life of the condemned Domingo Hernandez here and made him such a hero to a considerable section of the town's populace that he was given his freedom.

Hernandez was a native Californian who had been known for years as a desperate and bad man, horse thief and an escaped convict. He had been sentenced by the alcalde's court after a Jury trial to be executed by hanging.

The situation was tense as the execution day arrived. It was known he was popular among a certain element of the people, so Alcalde Florencio Serrano anticipated possible trouble when the hour came to carry out the sentence.

Serrano therefore asked Colonel Mason, the provincial governor of the territory, for a detachment of soldiers to forestall any attempts to rescue Fernandez from the noose and spirit him away. The governor acceded to this request, ordering Capt. H. D. Burton to furnish an armed escort to the prisoner out of the military detachment stationed at the presidio at that time.

However, Colonel Mason made the strict provision that the soldiers were to form a guard solely for the safe-keeping of the condemned man and to take no part in the actual execution because that was the function of the civil authorities and not the army.

Hernandez was thus closely surrounded by armed troops when he was taken from our old Monterey jail, built in 1847, and marched to the hanging place. There a crowd was assembled.

The rope was fixed around his neck, but broke when he was raised into the air. A cheer went up from many of the onlookers and there was an immediate clamor against a second attempt to execute him.

Hernandez was taken back to the jail, but people gathered outside and pressed gifts of money on him in substantial sums. It was evident that his miraculous escape from the noose had raised him to the stature of a hero in their eyes.

Because it became obvious any further attempt to carry out the death sentence would create a tense situation.

the civil authorities finally determined to give Hernandez his release.

That night Hernandez celebrated his deliverance in uproarious fashion at a party where there was much drinking and gambling. During the evening, he got into a quarrel with another man and seriously injured him in a fight that ensued.

Domingo Hernandez subsequently continued his career as a desperado until he was captured and hanged by a vigilante party in later years.

It was 100 years ago that Governor Mason was trying to round up any possible missing records of the former Mexican regime in California.

He forwarded a request to Gov. Pio Pico, the last Mexican governor, that he turn over to the present American authorities all official records and papers in his possession that properly belong to the territorial archives.

Don Pico fled at the time of the conquest but subsequently returned and was living in Los Angeles. He and his brother, Andres Pico, were large ranch holders in the southern country. Pio Pico's adobe home is now a State Historical Monument.