Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

November 11, 1960

The Caledonia

Those of us who have traveled south on the highway along the inland route from Salinas to Paso Robles and have often sighed as we approached and passed the old adobe building just south of San Miguel Mission, will be interested in a bit of that building's past history.

"Although most of the tourists along Highway 101- El Camino Real, 'The King's Highway' - pass it by for a trip through the famous Mission San Miguel, some spark of architectural personality in the 'poor relation' occasionally attracts the visitor.

"They ask the residents of San Miguel or the Mission Fathers: 'What is that quaint little building on the other side of the highway - is it a part of the mission that has not been restored?'," Joyce Gombos writes in the Paso Robles Press.

And they are surprised to learn that it is neither a part of the Mission, nor is it being restored. Too bad there is not a lively historical society In the neighborhood, an owner who is interested in the preservation of a landmark or that it is not part of the Mission restoration project.

But the two-story building, known for the past half century as "The Old Caledonia," is California history at Its best California in her finery as the Belle of Old Spain, the new Republic of Mexico, and finally as the youngest daughter of the United States of America.

Joyce Gombos goes on to relate: "The Caledonia, now in desperate need of repairs to save it from oblivion, has quite a history. A story like all fairy tales, with happy times and tragedy: a story which begins with the Indians. And, a story of one of the first of the white men to call the Salinas Valley his home."

A man named Petronillo Rios, whose $8,000 sale made possible the city of El Pasode Robles, first owned "Caledonia."

According to a direct descendant of Petronillo, Frank Rios, a great-grandson, the adobe structure, situated on the banks of the Salinas River, was completed in 1854 by the Indian friends of his great-grandfather after 50 years of work.

Ten years before the Mission San Miguel, founded by the Spanish Padres in 1797 as the 16th in the chain of California missions, with its vast acres between Mission San Antonio to the North, and Mission San Luis Obispo to the south, had passed from Spanish hands to Mexican rule, it was falling into disrepair by the new "secularization."

The Mission estate was the property of Petronillo Rios, and his partner, William Reed, a sailor. Some say it was by a sale in the amount of $300, and that Reed was an Englishman. Frank Rios claims the land was a grant from the King of Spain, through the Republic of Mexico, and that Reed was a Scotsman, writes Mrs. Gombos.

Frank Rios, the great-grandson of Petronillo, lives In Santa Margarita. He remembers the stories told him by his grandfather, his uncles and others. The first Don Rios of the Salinas Valley is supposed to have come with the Spanish Padres in 1824 or 1825, when he was a boy of 12 or 13 years of age. Although he believes his grandfather was not a soldier In the Spanish Army, it has been written by Mrs. Beatrice Casey in "Padres and People" that Don Rios was a sergeant of the artillery at San Francisco in 1827, and a commander of artillery at Monterey from 1831 to 1840.

Petronillo was the grantee of the San Bernabe Rancho in 1842, as well as the San Miguel Mission estate and a claimant in 1852 for El Paso de Robles Rancho. He moved to Jolon during the early 1860's.

The old adobe never realized Its original purpose, according to Frank Rios, and Petronillo, instead of living in it, offered the building as a school house for the children of San Miguel. It was designed with six bedrooms on the second floor. A large room downstairs had a dirt floor as was the custom of the day. Across the front, overlooking the Salinas River bank with Its green cottonwood trees, was a complete balcony and the roof was of the conventional red tile. Later the roof was replaced by shakes but the interior logs are the same ones placed there by the Indians who helped to build the adobe structure.