

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Monterey's Serra Oak**

Of interest to the visitor to the Old Custom House in Monterey are several framed pictures of the Serra Oak which once stood majestically to the left of the Presidio gate off Pacific street, Under this oak Don Gasper de Portola and Padre Junipero Serra held Mass, founded the Presidio of Monterey and took formal possession of the land in the name of Charles King of Spain, on June 3, 1770.

The formalities on that day - 190 years ago - consisted of planting of the royal standard, the uprooting of plants, and casting of stones, the latter symbolizing the seizing of the territory. The establishing of the mission of San Carlos de Monterey by Father Serra, which in 1771 was moved to its present site and renamed "San Carlos Borromeo del Carmel, was co-incidental.

The presidio, destined to be the capital of California, was founded on the beach near the oak under which Sebastian Vizcaino had claimed the land in 1603 and named it in honor of the Count of Monterey, ninth Viceroy of Mexico (1595-1603.)

The photographs now hanging in the upstairs north room of the Custom House were given by Harry A. Dutton (mayor of Los Altos) in June 1945. They were from the Louis Slevin collection of Carmel and Monterey Peninsula scenes, enlarged and framed by Mr. Dutton and presented to the History and Art Assn, for display.

The photos arrived on the 40th anniversary of the acceptance by the legislature of the Portola-Serra Landing place, now a State Historical Monument. The California Historical Landmarks League had been running a campaign to acquire, sufficient funds for the purchase of this property and finally accumulated enough. Something like \$13,000 was raised which sum was held in trust by William Randolph Hearst, as he generously opened the columns of his paper for the publicity necessary for the success of the venture. Stories were written by Laura Bride Powers.

When the League decided to purchase the Landing Place, there was enough left over to buy Sonoma Mission then used as a barn and a deceased saloon, with all evidence thrown about it, and Fort Ross. There was still something like \$500 left, which went toward the purchase of the First Theater in Monterey.

The League was able through considerable sleuthing, to save for California a Spanish landmark in the Landing Place; a Mexican Landmark; Sonoma Mission; and a Russian Landmark, Fort Ross, one of the most interesting historical possessions in the state. They gathered the funds together in 1903-04, and in 1905 the legislature made the transfer of title.

On June 3rd, 1949, following the gay Merienda in Memory Garden, a huge native rock in which was encased a bronze tablet, was unveiled and dedicated at the Landing Place in memory of Don Gasper de Portola, as part of the centennial celebration of the anniversary of the Constitutional Convention held in Monterey in 1849.

The oak at the Landing Place finally blew down or was cut down and floated out to the bay. The late Father Ramon Mestres, pastor of San Carlos Church, and Harry Green, a pioneer businessman of Monterey, recovered the trunk and set it up in the rear garden of the Royal Presidio chapel where it may be seen today. Mr. Dutton, the donor of the pictures, wrote Col. Fitch, the president of the Monterey History and Art Assn. on Sept. 6, 1945: "The oak is (or was), very definitely a quercus agrifolia. I have carefully examined the trunk, which is behind the Royal Chapel, as well as a labeled specimen found in the museum at Carmel Mission, and I am certain that the oak was a quercus agrifolia."

Before the 1949 centennial celebration, the late Col. Roger S. Fitch, had a good-sized oak pug from his garden on the Mesa and transplanted at the Landing Place, but alas, it is no longer there and instead there is a start of a small cypress tree. That specimen should now be removed before it becomes too large and another oak planted in memory of the first tree under which California was claimed for Spain and the first Mass was held by Father Serra.