

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Story Behind The Old Oak

There is a fascinating little story about the handsome oak tree which stands majestically upon the grounds of "El Cuartel," the new home of Monterey Fire and Police Departments on the northwest corner of Pacific and Madison streets. Last Tuesday afternoon the Monterey History and Art Assn, placed a bronze plaque upon the tree honoring the oak's planter, Elena Soler, who became Mrs. Achilles Chaine.

Many years ago, a seedling or an acorn was planted there by Elena when she was a very little girl. She became the mother of Mrs. Aimee Chaine Mundell, who died here a few years ago. The Soler adobe home stood on Pacific street, the property extending to Dutra street, where stood the Chaine cottage, which was moved to New Monterey when the city purchased the property a few years ago.

Elena Soler Chaine was the only child of Don Alberto Soler, a native of Barcelona, Spain, who came to Monterey with a group of young Spanish students to enter the Dominican priory here, and of Dona Francisca Gomez Soler, a native of Mexico, and affectionately called by Montereyans, "Dona Pachita." She came to Monterey with a theatrical troupe from Mexico City and performed in the Molera Adobe (Cooper house) at present the Dorothy Dean dancing academy. Elena's beauty attracted the attention of Robert Louis Stevenson and he honored her by writing a poem, "To the White Rose of Monterey."

If the oak could talk, it would tell of the parties, its branches, lighted by Chinese lanterns, of the singing, dancing and guitars playing. Mrs. Chaine being a finished guitarist; and of the afternoon children's parties, with tables spread under its friendly branches, loaded with all the "goodies" that children loved then as well as now.

The wedding of Elena Soler and Achilles Chaine was solemnized in the Royal Presidio Chapel of San Carlos (San Carlos Church) by Rev. Father Angel Casanova. Mrs. Mundell, the widow of Harvey Mundell, was one of the six children that blessed the union. Surviving are her two daughters, Mrs. Joan Hartley and Mrs. Harvia Manning, and a sister, Miss Ruth Chaine of New York City, and several nieces and nephews.

May the oak tree planted so many years ago by Mrs. Chaine continue to grow and spread its branches, welcoming all who come to make their homes on the beautiful Monterey Peninsula. It is the realization of the hope of her family that the tree would one day be marked with a plaque in memory of a lovely lady that so many long years ago graced the social life of the Monterey that was.

This Christmas season the oak is charmingly featured with spotlights and beneath its wide-spreading branches is a group of colorful conventionalized trees and figures, making a happy holiday scene.

The little old Chaine house that was moved from Dutra street up to New Monterey in April, 1958, was built about 80 years ago by Achilles on property presented to him and his bride, Elena Soler Chaine, by her parents, Don Alberto and Dona Francisca Gomez Soler. The Solers lived in an adobe home facing Pacific street, which was torn down many years ago.

The story goes: Francisca Soler had a lady friend over to her home and they were talking, as women do, and did not want Elena to hear, so they sent her out to play and suggested that she plant an acorn. She did and it grew to the lovely old oak now gracing the front garden of El Cuartel. We do not know exactly how old the little lady was then, but it is presumed that she was about four or five years of age. At the base of the tree all the pets of the family were put to rest and different kinds of birds built their nests in its branches.