

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Story Of Old Gabriel

The old Gabriel of the story we ran recently was probably the Old Gabriel who lies buried in the old neglected Roman Catholic cemetery between Salinas and Castroville. One afternoon a few years ago we made a visit to that cemetery with the express purpose of finding Gabriel's grave, which we had been told was there. We found it after spending considerable time looking. The marble tombstone was lying on the ground uncared for and was musty with age.

Carved into the marble was this epitaph: "To the memory of Old Gabriel, who died March 14, 1890, aged 151 years. Gabriel was baptized by the Rev. Fra Junipero Serra, the first missionary of the California."

The picture of the tombstone taken by the late L. S. Slevin, shows the old Indian dressed up, probably in levis, with a sports jacket and a top hat, leaning on a wooden cane. The picture was taken in 1889. A photo print of an article which appeared in a newspaper at the time of the old man's death is attached to the two photographs. The copy gives his death date in the Monterey County Hospital. He claimed to have been present when Father Junipero Serra the first missionary to Alta California, landed in Monterey in 1770, and that he was at the time a grandfather.

If old Gabriel's claim is true, he could not have been younger than 32 by the fact that his son, Zachariah, by a third or fourth wife, died at Gonzales six or eight years before the death of Gabriel, at a very advanced age, stated to be 114. Residents of Gonzales united in affirming that the son had the appearance of being a very old man.

Up to about 1885 there was at the county hospital a Christianized Indian named Jose Lauriano of the same tribe with Gabriel, who stated that Gabriel was a very old man when he was a child. Lauriano was a very old man when he died.

Father Sorrentini, Catholic priest in Salinas at the time, first saw Old Gabriel in 1854, and says he was a very old man then. He procured the affidavits of four very old people, all of whom knew Old Gabriel to be an old man when they were children, and sent these affidavits, along with a likeness of the Indian to Rome and the

likeness was hung on the walls of the Vatican as that of the oldest man at that time, in the world.

The article in the newspaper goes on to state that the evidence is pretty conclusive that Old Gabriel was born about the time George Washington was hacking cherry trees with his little hatchet. Old Gabriel was a strict Catholic and punctilious in his observance of his religious duties. He was said to have been a light eater, and never used intoxicating liquors, tobacco, tea or coffee, but was fond of fruits and everything sweet.

He was small and sinewy and probably never weighed over 150 pounds in his prime. He was attached to the missions as a Christianized Indian, or neophyte as such Indians were termed, from 1770 until the secularization of the missions in 1832. Under the instructions of the early fathers, he became expert as a mason in laying walls with adobe and stone.

About 1854, he was allowed to occupy a small patch of land on the farm of W. S. Johnson near Natividad. Old Gabriel was so old at that time he could do very little actual work but spent his leisure time weaving serapes and cinches, in the making of these he was an expert. He was then living; it is said, with his seventh wife and he had a son about 15 years old.

Father Sorrentini stated at the funeral service that all of Gabriel's wives had died of natural causes and all but possibly the first two, he had married in the church.

Tradition states that Old Gabriel had such wonderful vitality in his prime that he could travel with a horse all day, and was so agile he could stand before another Indian and dodge arrows before they reached him. Old Gabriel was averse to bathing, but delighted in a sun bath, and would scrape himself all over once or twice a week with an old sheath knife. He could thread a needle with his naked eye up to two years before his death. He died of pneumonia with five teeth still in his head and his hair had much of the original black still in it.