

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

October 21, 1963

### **Making Adobe**

I borrowed a column for today from Ed Ainsworth of Pasadena for the reason that I think it is very good and fits so very well into the Monterey scene of both past and present. The column appeared in a Pasadena newspaper and was sent to me by a Southern California friend. I am sure the writer will not mind.

Mr. Ainsworth writes "We got to talking here the other evening about a very earthly subject—namely the lasting quality and safety of adobe bricks..." The matter came up during a discussion of one of the great mysteries of the Southwest including California; Why have the detailed plans of the famous California missions built by the Jesuit and Franciscan priests never been found?... The consensus of the authoritative specialists who were participating in the informal conversation was simple: Because the plans never existed in physical form, only in the minds of the builders...

"This I must confess that I was fascinated by the whole topic although not qualified myself to participate in the discussion with any experience or expertness... We were all guests at a small dinner at the Huntington Sheraton given by Mr. and Mrs. Carl Dentzel of Southwest Museum for Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Fontana of Tucson... Dr. Fontana is ethnologist for the State Museum of Arizona and formerly field historian for the University of Arizona, and a great authority on Southwest and the missions in particular...

Dr. Fontana, Dentzel and Burnett Turner, architect for the Los Angeles Plaza, all agreed the priests in charge of construction of the missions were scholars in many realms—architecture, music, science and history—that in the architectural realm they evolved their plans as they went along out of the materials available.

"The width of the of adobe buildings was determined by the length of the beams to be had: The proportions of stone structures by the size of the blocks and the nature of the stone...

"Naturally, the subject of that magnificent structure, San Xavier de Bac near Tucson—Known as "The White Dove of the Desert" came up... Dr. Fontana was telling about having had some adobes made recently of the historical colonial proportions, 4x12x18 in., and how the

straw was thoroughly mixed in, as was the case even in ancient Egypt... Then he recounted how the old convent portion of San Xavier del Bac was constructed of sun-dried adobe bricks of this nature and how they had stood up without a sign of damage under the impact of terrific earthquakes...

The remarkable thing about mission architecture of the 17th and 18th centuries in the southwest is that it differed in detail in Baja California, Northern Sonora and Arizona, Alta California and Texas because of the differences in indigenous materials... But at the same time it maintained a classical similarity because of the artistic and technical capabilities of the Spanish and Mexican builders...

Dr. Fontana mentioned the destruction or disappearance of the original chain of missions built in 1687 to 1711 by the Jesuit Father Eusebio Francisco Kino in Pimeria Alta, the region in present northern Sonora and Arizona where the Piman speaking Indians resided... These, in turn, were replaced by Franciscan structures... Mrs. Fontana, a distinguished artist, has depicted these missions in the Kino chain... She also has illustrated the recent book, "Cycles of Conquest," by Dr. Edward H. Spicer of Arizona...

"In contrast to the strength displayed by many of the adobe buildings in the mission chains, the Pico House at the plaza in Los Angeles was cited by Turner as requiring great amounts of steel reinforcing because of deterioration of the building material used with conventional baked bricks...

"Dentzel head of the Cultural Heritage in Los Angeles, mentioned that San Fernando Mission is actually the only massive example of Spanish architecture in the city of Los Angeles (it not being in San Fernando city, as some suppose)...