

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 8, 1963

Remembrances Of Old San Juan Bautista

I have just read a fascinating small book entitled "Early Days at San Juan Bautista" by Isaac L. Myler and published about 1929 by the Watsonville Pajaronian. It is a narrative of incidents connected with the day when California was young. James G. Piratsky, the editor of the Pajaronian in those early days, wrote in the introduction: "I desire to write that I have never engaged in a more pleasant task than in listening to Mr. Isaac Myler's reminiscences connected with Mission San Juan Bautista, in San Benito County.

"A matter of wonderment, too, is Mr. Myler's remarkable memory. Although now (1929) he relates incidents connected with his boyhood in San Juan, with a clearness that is certainly remarkable for a man of his age."

Only a small edition of 300 autographed copies were issued. When this number was disposed of, the holders of this little volume possessed a book that is unique in this respect: It is a limited edition, and no more were printed. No. 225 of the issue is in the Monterey Public Library.

From the chapter on various phases of life in San Juan during 1861-1862 we found information of value at this time of the approaching dates for the Merienda, June 1, and of the Adobe House Tour, Aug. 10, for the fashions of both men and women in those days.

The stores of that period (1855-1850) carried general assortments - there were no ready-to-wear women's garments. They bought the materials and made up the garments at home, by hand, at first, until the advent of the sewing machine, which was some years later. It was not uncommon to see a woman or her daughter continually sewing on garments, even at night, in the home circle. Of course, if it was a very fine dress, it was taken to a dressmaker.

The Spanish women excelled in needlework and their drawn work was incomparable. As Mr. Myler wrote: "If you got a peep at their undergarments, they were immaculate and starched until they rattled. There were no coats worn by the women, they all wore shawls of different grades. Some were woolen, while others were of the finest silk, Men's suits could be bought in the stores. Men's work shirts were piled on the counter; if

you wanted to buy one you picked, it up and held it in front of you with a cuff in both hands with arms extended. If the tail was long enough and the sleeves about right, you bought it regardless of size of the collar. Shirts were, generally, all the same color; either small check or hickory. Ties were seldom worn.

White shirts for dress purposes had the collar attached which was worn as a standing collar. Boots were worn by all men. They were on display in boxes on the floor along the counter and were bought as you bought shirts. You found the style you wanted and tried on pair after pair until you found a fit. You did not pay any attention to sizes and if the merchant had anything to attend to, he let you alone until you found a satisfactory pair.

It was told on one of the prominent merchants in San Juan, at that time, that someone bought a pair of boots on credit and the merchant forgot who it was, So he charged them up to all his credit customers. If any of them made a kick about it, he would scratch the item off their bill. Wonder how many times he got paid for those boots.

Mr. Myler's recordings end with these compliments to the old mission town: "Poor old San Juan Bautista! You have seen many happy and despondent days. You have been knocked down and dragged out, kicked, and cuffed, and almost took the count; but still you are in the ring. San Juan had many handicaps. She never could expand on account of the large land-ownings in her immediate vicinity. Imagine the result had Col. Hollister retained the west half of San Juan Valley in place of the east half."

"Concluding these memoirs, I feel that I have not done justice to the memory of those early pioneers, or their descendants, of Old San Juan Bautista. They stand out clearly in my mind as the best there are in humanity. True friendship is a rare gem; I found it in the old mission town."