

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 19, 1963

Living Like Spanish Dons

Santa Barbara has just celebrated her fourth annual casa tour held during Fiesta Week in that delightful old town south of us. A complete edition of the Santa Barbara News Press has been mailed to us by Miss Pearl Chase of that city and we are most happy to acknowledge it with thanks and tell our readers more about this festive occasion.

The old adobes in Santa Barbara were of course featured during the Fiesta Week. One writer reports: "Old Adobes" is no longer a correct expression. The oldest building material known to man, mud, is having a resurgence of popularity in the communities which celebrate the fun-loving fiestas of its Spanish heritage and emulates all year the easy-going life of the dons.

"If you have ever lived in an adobe, you will never live anywhere else," says a Santa Barbaran who is an adobe expert.

Elmer Whittaker, an engineer, historian, and an adobe dweller, has been studying this type of architecture and construction for over 40 years. He has had his hand in restoring the old mission, building adobe homes in Santa Barbara and presently is overseeing construction of the new adobe Historical Society Museum on De La Guerra street.

"Adobe bricks are the easiest thing in the world to make," Whittaker believes, "and the cheapest."

The formula is simplicity itself - 10 parts of clay to one part of cement. This is the formula for the museum now under construction in Santa Barbara. There are other formulas used by building contractors which make use of an oil emulsifier which serves to both bind the clay and waterproof it.

Many of the old adobes disintegrated into a pile of mud during a rainstorm, but the technique of using a little cement does away with the possibility, according to Mr. Whittaker.

How long does adobe last?

"As long as the earth," says Whittaker. "If you build an adobe house now, it will still be here when you are gone."

"We all know the world is getting short of raw materials and will get shorter in the years to come. But the earth is always here."

According to our informant, all it takes to build an adobe home in your own back yard in spare time is the clay from the excavation of the new house and a simple-to-make form.

The form, composed of 2-by-4s constructed like a ladder, is laid on the ground and the adobe mixture poured in. In about 10 minutes the form can be lifted, and another row of adobes laid down.

Mr. Whittaker said, "You can actually make adobes in the afternoon, and lay them the next morning."

Adobes made with the 10-to-1 formula have strength of about 1,000 pounds per square inch, compared to 2,000 to 3,000 psi for concrete. The building codes call for a strength of 300 psi, according to Whittaker. Most new construction of adobe incorporates columns of concrete for added strength, and another technique uses steel rods between the walls.

Some of the obvious advantages of adobe homes include quietness and cool in summer, warm in winter qualities. Other advantages probably are psychological, gained from the feeling of strength and security of the characteristic thick walls.

Attesting to the simplicity of adobe construction, Whittaker points out the technique was easily taught to the Indians by the mission fathers. Straw often was used because the stems were hollow. This brought air into the center of the brick, so it dried evenly and eliminated cracking.

The Santa Barbara builder lives with his wife in La Canada Adobe, which he purchased 15 years ago.