

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 15, 1965

Founding Of Carmel Mission

Peggy Light, a member of the fourth grade class of Forest Grove School in Pacific Grove writes: This letter is concerned with the date of the founding of Carmel Mission. I wish to clarify the date.

"The book Monterey's Adobe Heritage' gives 1771 as the correct date of the founding of Carmel Mission; however, in our texts, 1770 is the date given. Which date is correct? What is your reason for stating a later date?"

"Do you have any information about the first Christmas at Carmel Mission? We are going to write a play about it."

On May 25, 1770, Governor Portola and Father Crespi were again encamped under the Punta de los Pinos where they found the cross that had been erected Dec. 9, 1769, by Sergeant Ortega and on May 31, the San Antonio in command of Captain Don Juan Perez, with Engineer Costanso and Father Serra aboard cast anchor in the bay of Monterey, which they readily recognized as the "famous port" of Cabrillo and Viscaïno, for they saw it at the same angle as had the earlier explorers.

On June 3, preparations were in readiness to celebrate mass and take formal possession of the country in the name of the King of Spain, Carlos III.

When the functions of the church had been concluded the commander and Gaspar de Portola raised again the royal standard. The small shelter that had been used as a chapel at the first services was improved and formally consecrated as a church on June 16, 1770, the day of Nuestra Senora del Carmel; crude barracks were erected for the soldiers, temporary dwellings for the officers and missionaries and the whole was surrounded by a brush palisade.

In December of the following year, Father Serra removed the mission establishment to a site five miles from the presidio and on the present site of Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo de Monterey. At the new mission both Father Serra and Father Crespi began the study of the dialect of the Eslenes Indian, by whom they were surrounded, and through this means and giving freely of gifts they were enabled to enroll 175 converts within the first three years of the church.

Both Father Crespi and Father Serra were buried in the old chapel—for it was not until June 7, 1793, that the corner stone was laid for the new church Mission Carmel. The original structure was built of soft straw-colored stone, quarried nearby and said to harden by exposure to air. The lime used in the construction of the building was made from sea shells. The roof was of artistic red tiles.

The reason given for the moving of the mission to Carmel as given by Father Serra, was lack of water and fertile soil at Monterey.

Between the years 1810-1820 a new chapel adjoining the church was built and dedicated which seems a strange fact as the neophyte population had decreased to but 381 and the whole numbers of baptisms for the past ten years had been but 400; marriages 109; deaths 397. Grain crops and stock was but of little value. In 1833, a Zacatecan, Father Jose Real, was placed in charge.

The following year secularization was effected and the statement was made that there was little property left and by 1840 none at all remained, excepting the ruined buildings. Father Real lived in Monterey and held only occasional services in Carmel. The church which contained the remains of Father Serra, the founder of the missions, was left to the mercy of the elements and vandals.

On July 3, 1882, Father Casanova announced that the tombs of Father Serra and Crespi would be opened. Over 400 persons came from San Francisco, stayed at the Del Monte, and traveled on to Carmel. An interesting account of the opening of the tombs is given by Rev. Zepherine Englehardt OFM in his book, "The Franciscans in California." Another small book "California Missions and Landmarks" by Mrs. A.S.C. Forbes, is also a very good reference book. Much of the material given to Peggy Light came from these books.

For a book or books on Christmas plays in Monterey in the early days, I would recommend "Navidad" a play for Christmas Day with early Californians by Don Arturo Bandini and "Pastorela, a Shepherd's Play," translated with a note, by Gladys Louis Williams, published by the California Historical Society. It should be available in any library of the Monterey Peninsula.