

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Treeless Streets

The Spaniards first of the early settlers in Monterey found indeed a virgin territory. In power until 1822, they did not change greatly the aspects of the land.

The walled-in Presidio the main characteristic of Spanish Monterey and having for its purpose the function of defense was not conducive to an enlarged landscape treatment. Later residents of the Spanish period who built houses outside the Presidio walls, had an opportunity to plant gardens and trees.

Never on a large scale, though. Those gardens consisted of the staples of potatoes, beans, maize, cabbage, onions, pumpkins, peas, garbanzos, turnips and peppers.

Pictures of Monterey in the Mexican period tend to point out disregard for landscape treatment. Illustrations made by Thomas Larkin in 1842 show plantings only in a few places. Larkin himself had a garden and sold flowers at times. Trees were planted to one side of his house and in the rear. There were shrubs in the Amesti yard and in that of Mariano Estrada. What impresses one most however, is the apparent lack of trees and shrubbery around the houses and along the streets.

The following statements are typical findings of researchers:

“Hardly a house in the whole country possessed a vegetable or a flower garden” ... “Even in the towns it was a rare thing to see flowers or shrubbery about the houses of Californians” ...

Of course a great deal of this lack was because of lack of running water, either outside or inside. During the American period, not much change came in the landscape treatment until the 1880s. True, that which had been planted earlier grew to immense size and beauty in certain circumstances. Early newspapers speak of the beautiful roses.

Real consciousness of the lack of trees and shrubbery was probably caused by an editorial in the Monterey Gazette on March 31, 1866. The editor, Mr. Hubbell, realizing the situation penned the following appeal to the citizens:

“Plant trees—the comparative absence of trees, fruit and ornamental, in Monterey and its suburbs, had often been a matter of wonderment to us. They are generally among the first evidences of progress and enterprise. It is not because the climate and soil are not adapted to their culture, for we have on the surrounding hills a great abundance of a tree that is already known for its vigorous growth and systematic proportions.

“The Monterey cypress is sought and cultivated more than that of any other ornamental tree in all parts of California; while a walk through our streets will not reveal half a dozen in the entire town. The houses look barren and cheerless in their white-washed monotony, unrelieved by a tree or scarcely a shrub.

“Not only are we devoid of shade and ornamental trees, the magnificent slopes that stretch from the hills to the shore of the bay, seem to be especially adapted to the growth of fruit trees.

“Plant fruit trees, that birds may lodge in their branches and gladden you with their songs; plant trees that ye may breathe the fragrance of their blossoms, languish in their grateful shade, and when autumn brings maturity, ye may gather the golden harvest.”

That editorial had its effect. A year later the paper printed the news that trees were being planted on Alvarado street in front of the premises of Mr. Calaghan and John Roth. In 1869, David Jacks was selling Monterey cypress and pines.

It is said that David Spence planted the first almond trees in Monterey. He also planted 100 fruit trees for W.E.P. Hartnell at the Hartnell home, a large adobe residence which stood where Monterey Hospital now stands.