

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Almaden History

A custom at the New Almaden quicksilver mines in Santa Clara County will be of interest in Monterey because it concerns a Cascaron Ball much like the ones given here by the Monterey Civic Club, just before the start of the Lenten season.

The Almaden Ball was held originally in the Big Pianilla at the mouth of the main or San Francisco tunnel. After 1870 it was held in the Spanishtown boarding house near the Big Rock, so a very old copy of the "Pony Express" reports.

Cornish miners started to come to New Almaden in the late 1850's. They were Methodists and had an imposing church on the northern slope of Church Hill. For many years the steeple of that church was a landmark all over the Santa Clara Valley. The Cornishmen had a school recreation hall, boarding house and a resident physician who also took care of the Mexican families.

The Methodist church of Cornishtown was built about 1884. The first building was destroyed by fire and the second blown down in a severe storm. It was reanchored, mining style, by Capt. Harry Bulmore, a son of Robert R. Bulmore, who was a member of the official staff at the mine from 1878 to 1900. The captain wrote: "New Almaden was the original name but in 1921 the post office there was closed. When it was reopened in 1932 at the old Hacienda, it was called simply Almaden but the community is still called New Almaden."

The present post office is on the right hand side of the main street near the well-kept state highway maintenance and fire station. It appears to be the very smallest building in this old community.

We quote: "One of the Mexican customs, the Cascaron Ball, became the annual social affair in the community. This was a local name. The proper name was Baile de Carnival and it was termination of Carnestoldendas, the three-day fiesta held just before Ash Wednesday.

As the cascaron was the most important accessory of the dance, the ball at New Almaden was so named. Months before the Lenten season the housewives began collecting eggshells. Whenever possible, eggs were not broken but drained through a small opening at one end and the shells set aside to dry.

"When the time for the ball arrived the seniors and senioritas made the eggshells into cascarones. Colored paper was cut into confetti and a thimbleful was put into each shell. The end was then sealed with colored paper and lo! The cascaron. The eggshells being empty were symbolic of the abstinence from meat that was to follow the carnival, the word carnival from a derivation from the Latin meaning 'goodbye to flesh.'"

To visit New Almaden from the Peninsula involves a short and interesting motor trip with several routes to choose from. The motorists may travel over the Prunedale road and take the highway almost to San Jose, turning to the left at a directional sign before reaching that city, or go to Watsonville and travel over Hecker Pass and take the back roads, which would be the writer's choice.

The country over which one passes is still pretty much as it was in the old days; mountains, tree-laden hills, extensive farms and green orchards (very soon) to greet the eye. Make the trip soon while the hills and the Santa Clara Valley are still grass-green.

Almaden was a mining community before the Gold Rush to California. More than twenty million dollars in quicksilver has been taken from the mines there. The first Almaden "mineros" came from Mexico in 1847.

They built their homes on a knoll not far from the original excavation and besides the little cottages eventually there were a little Catholic church, school, boarding house, cantina and a butcher shop.