

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

June 18, 1965

Monterey's Pioneer Priest

The Rev. James S. McGowan, a pioneer priest in the early days of the Episcopal Diocese of California, was the builder of St. James Church Monterey; St. Paul's, Salinas; St. Luke's-in-the-Hills, Jolon; St. John's, San Miguel; St. Mark's, King City; St. Thomas at Raymond, near Yosemite Valley, and Christ Church at Fresno Flats.

It was on the sixth day of July, 1873, that the reverend gentleman about whom we write today arrived in California from Prattville, Wis. The following day he reached his brother's home in Watsonville and learned that there had been a lynching in Monterey a few days before.

"This gave me a little shock, since I thought that I had come to a civilized state," he wrote in his diary.

His first parish was in Castroville, and then he began services in Salinas. Railroad fare at that time was seven cents a mile and, he wrote, "Our humble servant was not rich." He did not always have cash to pay his fare; therefore, that he might keep his promise "to hold the fort," he several times walked the road from Castroville to Salinas, a distance of 20 miles.

Before the consecration of the church at Salinas, Father McGowan took up his work in Monterey, driving the 20 miles from Salinas after morning services there. He held his first service "in the old capital of the state on March 14, 1875, in the dance hall of the Washington Hotel."

Father McGowan's health failed at Salinas, and in trying to regain it he sought Jolon in southern Monterey County. From his sick bed he was called to St. Paul's in Salinas one day to baptize the children of Claude Smith of Jolon, who traveled the 80-mile distance for the ceremony. Smith asked the priest to visit him, and the invitation was accepted the following spring.

While there, Father McGowan held services in the schoolhouse near Jolon, for which one churchman rode 30 miles from San Miguel. When he had actually been transferred to the new field, he could not find a house for his family, so he took up a homestead claim of government land and made preparations to build. While the new home was being constructed, they camped out under the oaks for three months.

At one service a Dr. Parker from Oakland told Father McGowan that if he would build in Monterey his wife would give \$50. This, he thought, was rather fine and was worth a trial. A subscription was started; the sum of \$575 was pledged for the building, and \$600 more was raised in San Francisco and vicinity.

The contract was let, and the church was completed at a cost of about \$1,200. The building was consecrated by Bishop Kip on July 14, 1878, and was the first Protestant church in Monterey.

"I must say," wrote the clergyman in his diary, "that Princess Louise, the daughter of Queen Victoria, and her husband worshipped in this little church when they were in California."

Last week the 50th anniversary of Father McGowan's death and burial was observed in St. James Church, Monterey.