

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Ship Was Badly Needed

A ship was badly needed in California in 1719 so Father Juan Ugarte was a man of action. A gem of a little book entitled "First Ship Built in the Californias" an essay, "El Triunfo de la Cruz" (The Triumph of the Cross), was published in The Californian, San Francisco, of January 1880 and republished by the California Historical Society in later years. It was written by Theodore H. Hittell, one of the best known historians in the state and the editor of "History of Californians" in four volumes, 1885-1897.

It is the inspiring story of a determined man who simply ignored insurmountable obstacles and got the job done anyway. What mattered that the only wood available was more than two hundred miles away in the form of uncut trees in almost inaccessible high mountains; that he had only unskilled Indians to help cut the trees, hew planks, build a road for ninety miles? And what mattered that he himself knew nothing about such things? This book tells how he succeeded despite problems that would have stopped a lesser man, how he built a very good ship, El Triunfo dela Cruz.

Father Juan Ugarte was, in his humble way, one of the founders of his age. He was not only one of the founders of California, but he was that one of them who established agriculture and manufacturing in the country.

It was under his protection and fostering care that the first fields were planted, the first orchards set out, the first vines grown, and the first grapes pressed. He was also the first to bring cattle and flocks from Mexico and after he got his fields and vineyards to growing and flourishing—to set up spinning wheels and looms; so that within less than a decade, able to depend entirely upon itself, the colonization of California was self-sustaining, and all owing to the extra-ordinary exertions and wonderful practical ability of this one man—he who makes two blades where only one blade grew before; if as we are now beginning to be made to believe, the greatest man is one who most successfully cultivates the arts of peace—then must the name of Juan Ugarte be recused from the comparative oblivion in which it has been allowed to sink, and advanced on the role of human excellence, wrote Dr. Hittell.

The circumstances under which this first California ship was built, and the uses to which it was applied, as well as the character of its builder, render it one of the most interesting structures of which our early history treats. As before stated it was in 1719, when all hope of further support from Spain and Mexico for the Jesuit colonization of California had been abandoned, and the missionaries were left to depend upon themselves alone. At that period they had but a single ship, and that a very small one, which had been tossed about for several years, and was stained and wrenched in almost every joint. All of others had been cast away in the waters of the tempestuous gulf, and destroyed. Father Ugarte decided that the new ship should be built in California, where the laying of every plank, and the driving of every spike could be superintended by someone who was interested in seeing the work well done. So Father Ugarte no sooner formed the thought than he set upon the task of carrying it into execution.

The first action he now took was to get rid of the shipwright. He then, with making one show or flourish about what he intended to do, picked out a few of the best and strongest soldiers; and choosing a few of the most faithful Indians, and taking along axes and the requisite other tools, he again started out over the same crags he had traversed before, and, after a third painful journey, reached the place of his invaluable trees standing in primeval solitude. He at once set to work, himself felling the trees and fashioning them into planks. When that work was finished, he set about to build a road from that place to the newly established mission of Santa Rosalia a distance of about 90 miles, and from there he cleared out a stream so as to float down the remainder of the way to the Gulf shore and then borrowed oxen and mules from neighboring missions.

The first considerable journey made by Ugarte's new vessel was in November, 1720 from Loreto to La Paz, a distance of about 120 miles, where he founded a new mission.