

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 14, 1970

Bringing the Spanish Sword and Catholic Cross to California

When Portola stepped on the land which is present-day San Diego a vast and complex undertaking began. We present-day Californians are reaping many of the fruits and the problems that came out of that undertaking.

This first expedition was directed by Don Gaspar de Portola, captain of dragoons and governor of California. His second in command, Don Fernando Rivera y Moncada, captain of the armored company, had very specific instructions that read: Establish San Diego and pass on to found Monterey. The Church was represented by the Venerable Father President Junipero Serra, O.F.M., S.T.D., and Fr. Juan Crespi, Fr. Francisco Gomez, Fr. Juan Vizcaino and Fr. Fernando Parron. These padres, sons of St. Francis, were responsible for the conversion to Christianity of the people of the land that they were about to explore.

I have mentioned previously the military and the religious phases of colonization of Alta California. Now the civic organization of the pueblos. This phase usually came last for various reasons.

If perchance the selected site was ill chosen or unsuitable because of many unforeseen problems, permanency was not considered until a while after the first settling. We can see this was evident because both the San Diego and the Monterey mission sites were other than the original locations merely because better spots were found after the initial selections.

The ordinary military guard or escolta stationed at each mission consisted of a cabo and five private soldiers. At times this detail was doubled, depending on the duties assigned. One most important assignment was to escort the mission padre whenever he left the mission compounds.

The mission business and administration was under the padre's jurisdiction. There his authority was absolute.

In civic matters, both the padre and cabo would confer with the comandante, the comandante being the superior officer directly under the gobernador.

The presidio, pueblo and mission plans were for the most part very well set and defined. A presidio was usually a square of 200 varas. Vara measurement varied

throughout California and other Spanish possessions. In Monterey the vara was about 33 inches.

Almost immediately after the "Te Deum" was chanted, a wall was built around the site. A palisada-type of construction about 4 varas in height was built as protection against possible hostile Indians. The palisada corral was then replaced by an adobe wall, a much more permanent structure.

For a moment, let us get back to the vara. It is said that it was originally known in Mexican antiquity as "Solomon's Pace." Under this early system of measurement there were 1,000 paces of Solomon to a mile and 3 miles to a league. In Spanish colonial times a vara was stabilized roughly at 33 inches. However, let us remember that much of the employed method of measurement used in the past days lacked the precision of today. In marking a large piece of land, the vaqueros would use their lariats as a measuring length and this was done without getting off the horse and so the "Solomon Pace" theory was measured by the horsemen, and horsemen wouldn't be expected to get down off their horses and walk!

The pueblo was a bit slower in forming and it followed the presidio and mission in development after permanence was assured in the said area.

Dear reader, more details of the founding, development and prosperous eras of the presidios, missions, and pueblos of San Diego, Monterey, Santa Barbara and San Francisco will follow.