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Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

THE PICO HOUSE

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THE PICO HOUSE

Many are the memories in Los Angeles left by the genial Pío Pico, last of the Mexican governors. While most traces go back to before the United States invasion, yet the last magnificent gesture by the California dreamer remains today a monument to his final futile effort to fit into the new order. The Pico House, unrivaled in its day in size and luxury, not only failed to preserve Don Pío's diminishing fortunes but ended by being rivaled, surpassed, and then relegated to the rating of hardly a third class hostelry. Around it the second generation after the United States invasion grew up and possessed the land and changed the city into something undreamed of during the time when Don Pío was at the height of his career. The house itself was not discarded - it was not out of date enough for that - but rather ignored and largely forgotten.

There was always something of the bizarre and unusual about the Pico House, even the history of the land upon which it was situated. The only case in which a written title had been given by the ayuntamiento was that of this same site when the original lots were granted to Señor José Antonio Car-

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rillo in 1821. Carrillo had petitioned for "a parcel of land containing forty varas (111 feet) front and sixty (166 feet) deep, bounded with Doña Encarnación Urquidez, Don Francisco Sepulveda and near the new church which is now in course of erection."¹ Although no consideration was mentioned in the document, the price of land at the time was exceedingly low. Ten years later, when some record of sales prices was kept, a lot with a hundred foot frontage would cost about \$8. Consequently, if there were any charge at all for Don José's deed, it was exceedingly trifling. The large, imposing adobe built by Carrillo long remained a center of social life in Los Angeles. It was there that Pío Pico was married.

In 1869, nine years after the death of his wife, his beloved Doña Marie, Don Pío laid plans for his advent into the hotel business. Up to that time, even taking into consideration the historic Bella Union, there was no really excellent hotel which could boast of the latest improvements in comfort and luxury. Furthermore, there were no buildings more than two stories high in the city; so Don Pío's plan,

1. Quoted in C. D. Willard, The Herald's history of Los Angeles city, 260.

calling for a structure of three floors, was an innovation. Finances were obtained partly by his brother, Andrés Pico, who obtained \$100,000 from the sale of his San Fernando ranch.² First the old adobe of José Antonio Carrillo was razed; then the foundations were laid for the Pico House. E.F. Kyser was the architect in charge, under the direction of Antonio Cuyás who became the first manager.³

When the grand opening was held on June 19, 1870, the admiring populace of the southern city was treated to a display of elegance above anything which had appeared in Los Angeles up to that time. The eastern side of the Pico House on the plaza faced on Main Street, as indeed did four of its leading competitors. It had cost \$48,000 to build its three stories and \$34,000 to furnish them, making a total outlay of \$82,000. There were eighty-two rooms, including twenty-one suites wherein the elegance of appointment dazzled the townsmen. Furthermore, a great novelty was added showing that Don Pío and his partners were completely abreast of their time: there were three built-in bathrooms, one for each floor! Gas lighting was used

2. C.J. Prudhomme and T.F. Keaveney, "Early days in Los Angeles county. III. Dead Man's Island, Dominguez rancho, the Picos, daughters of the dons, retrospection," in Grizzly Bear, LX.6:5.
3. Star, November 11, 1874.

throughout, which was additional evidence of the Pico House's modernity. The lobby, considered in the seventies to be very spacious, was eighteen feet wide by thirty-four feet long. It was especially well furnished, and it soon became a center for the most refined and accomplished of the local society.⁴ Over all, Señor Don Antonio Cuyas presided in his suave Spanish manner, making everyone welcome and comfortable.

For years the Pico House remained the principal hotel in Los Angeles. To it went many travelers of distinction. Newlyweds selected it, too, for what could be a fitter climax to romance and a better beginning of a long and happy married life than to spend the honeymoon at the Pico House? Among the famous guests of that early period was one who was certainly not very popular with the people of Los Angeles. This was Vincent Collyer, a peace commissioner sent out by the United States to quiet Indian disturbances. He won considerable notoriety and hostility from the people in the southern part of the state just before he stopped at the Pico House in 1871 by pleading the

4. B.C. Truman, Semi-tropical California: its climate, healthfulness, productiveness, and scenery, 19.

cause of some Apaches who had gone on the warpath and had scalped a considerable number of their white neighbors. One newspaper went so far as to declare that if the citizens wished to see a monster they had only to stand before the hotel and watch Collyer pass to and fro! That type of notoriety must have irked the polished Señor Cuyas considerably, although until the first of the seventies Los Angeles had the name of being one of the most lawless towns in the United States, and violence and notoriety were by no means novel to its life.

There was another side to the life centering around the Pico House. That was the courteous, unhurried, polished manners, a survival of old Mexico. A good illustration of this is found in an anecdote concerning Pio Pico:

One of the interesting characters of the early days was Don Pio Pico. I shall never forget an incident that happened when I was a small boy. The old Don was a fine looking man, I think past eighty at the time. He was standing on the steps of the Pico House. An Indian beggar stepped in front of him, a small, old, diminutive man, wearing a towering broad-brimmed sombrero. With a beautiful bow and a sweep of the sombrero, he said, 'For the love of God' [Por amor de Dios]. Old Don

5. F. R. Burnham, "Remarks," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, XIII, 341.

Pío Pico made a very polite bow, as if he had just met a senator from Washington, and from his pocket he took a handful of silver and held it out to the beggar. The beggar only took the smallest coin, a ten-cent piece, made another low sweep of his hat, and said, 'The grace of God be with you forever.' Then he walked away. Old Don Pío Pico bowed as if he had met a friend, performed a duty, and then passed on.

Late in 1874, some difficulty arose between Don Pío and the popular Señor Cuyás. Even the Los Angeles Star commented upon the coolness between the two men and fervently hoped that the trouble would soon pass. However, Señor Cuyás soon severed his connection with the hotel and Charles Knowlton took his place. Knowlton found hotel competition to be very lively, for the St. Charles Hotel and others were doing everything to lure away the patronage of the Pico House. To add to the new manager's worries, a faulty sewer made the region around the hotel unpleasant. That was soon overcome. Knowlton, who did extensive advertising, concluded one advertisement with the following assurance pointed out by a large index-finger: "The unpleasant odor of gas has entirely disappeared since the building of the new sewer!"⁶

6. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 1833-1913, 469.

Although for many years the Pico House stood almost alone--in 1875 it was said that from the Pico House to the St. Charles Hotel there was virtually no business building, except possibly a fruit stand or a barber shop--it was more or less a center of development. The first fire engine of the fire company of volunteers, later becoming "thirty-eights" because of a reorganization by that number of citizens, was housed for a while after 1872 just back of the hotel. Furthermore, the first street-car line started from the Pico House, and that hotel was also the terminal for the San Francisco-Los Angeles stage lines until the coming of the railroads made stages unprofitable.

A large part in the life of the community was taken by the Pico House. It always added its part to the celebrations in decorations or hospitality. Especially did it outdo itself at the time of the centennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence by the United States in 1876. Los Angeles made it a truly gala affair. Decorations were everywhere, and portraits of Washington abounded. A triple arch was erected on Main Street, with the center span thirty feet wide and thirty feet high, over statues of Washington, Grant and other heroes. Even the railroad stations were adorned. But the Pico House had the most lavish display

of tinsel elegance. Besides the usual preparations, it had:
A column, a flagstaff and a Liberty cap, with the enthusi-
astic legends:⁷

1776. 1876. Now for 1976!

To the patrons of the Pico House: May you live 100 years!

No North, no South, no East, no West!

At times a great deal of excitement centered around the hotel. Especially did feeling run high during elections. Every possible means was used to gain votes, and in particular, discussions of a personal nature often took place. In 1879 occurred a campaign which was very hot and angry indeed. At the height of the electioneering, William A. Spalding, a reporter on the Evening Express, fancied himself to have been maligned by the editor of the Herald, Joseph D. Lynch. At eleven o'clock one morning Spalding discovered his hated enemy in the Pico House. He drew his pistol and waited for the editor to come out. Just as Lynch was leaving the hotel to cross Spring Street, Spalding opened fire. Lynch immediately dropped his cane and went for his gun, for during that time practically everyone was going armed. Before

7. Newark, California, 500.

the affair could develop into anything more serious, however, Antonio de Celis and other prominent gentlemen threw themselves between the combatants and stopped it. The only casualty was a bystander who was slightly wounded by the gun fire.

Towards the end of his life, Pío Pico's fortunes began to decline. He was always notoriously careless about business affairs and continually involving himself in short-time debts and obligations which carried very heavy interest rates. Finally he found it necessary to borrow some \$62,000 from Charles Prager, E. Cohen, and W.J. Broderick. As security he, without fully comprehending what was being required of him, gave a blanket mortgage for all of his property - even for the Pico House. Of course the property was worth many times the debt, but it was being held as security and consequently could not be sold by Pico. When the date for payment came, poor Don Pío was unable to meet the obligation; so he was left practically penniless, and the Pico House went to his creditors.⁸

8. H. D. Barrows, "Pío Pico," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, III, 111, 64-65.

In spite of the vicissitudes of its owners, the Pico House continued uninterrupted its existence as a Hotel. However, it slowly lost its position as the principal hotel in Los Angeles. The higher paying patronage slowly drifted away. Upon the deaths of Cohen, and Broderick, and their heirs, the property went to Charles Prager. For thirty-three years a new hotel manager, Guiseppe Pagliano, rented the Pico House from Prager and his heirs. Finally, on March, 1930, Pagliano purchased the property from the heirs of Prager for the sum of \$120,000, thus proving the soundness of Pico's original investment. He then spent \$24,000 on necessary alterations, repairs, and improvements, especially in sanitation. At the present time (1936), the lower floor is occupied by merchants and the two upper ones are rented as lodgings, even as in the time of Pio Pico.

Few places are more intimately connected with the political and social development of Southern California than the Pico House. It has watched the streaming mass of humanity before its doors develop and build the large modern city of Los Angeles. It has housed statesmen and politicians, capitalists and merchants, even thieves and rogues. Under its roofs have been formed plans, policies, and alliances which

have made California history. Furthermore, it has witnessed the birth of a new era. It has seen the new population crowd out the old. Before its doors the stage coach has given way to the railroad. The first street car came to its portals. The first fire engine was housed in its shadows, and today the airplane roars over its roof. All these things have taken place during its existence, but the sturdy old building continues to serve its community, even though in a much more humble capacity than as the foremost palatial hotel. The Pico House remains not only as a monument, but as a living monument!

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