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# MISIÓN LA PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN

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# MISIÓN LA PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN

To guard her far-flung frontiers in the western hemisphere, the Spanish government found the cross as effective as the sword. Many times it was more so. In subduing the numerous Gentile Indian population on the borders from Texas to California, the two coöperated in the effort to spread Hispanic culture. Although there were controversies many times between the officers of the two services, yet each knew and appreciated the aid of the other in the common task. Seldom was the soldier's armor unaccompanied by the friar's habit.

It was a huge task which the imperial government ordered the soldiers and priests to do. Not only were they to be explorers and pathfinders, but they were to civilize the savage Indian in order to lessen the danger to the following white settlers. Far from bases of supply as well as civilization, the frontier life led by these early heroes was arduous in the extreme. Their success in building can be measured by the ruins scattered over thousands of miles.

Of the different links in the chain of missions and presidios, those in California are among the most interesting. Not only are the missions there emblematic of a nation's power but they are also monuments to the faith,

energy, and perseverance of the individual men who made up the vanguard.

Father Serra, the indefatigable founder of the California missions, and the military commanders soon decided that for strategical purposes the Santa Barbara channel would have to be fortified. The powerful tribes there constituted a real menace to communications between the northern and southern settlements. In addition, the Indians along the coast had the highest culture of the tribes in Alta California with which the Spaniards came into contact, and this made them more susceptible to the introduction of Spanish civilization.

Plans were somewhat nebulous until 1777, when Governor Neve sent a report on the Santa Barbara region to the viceroy. His plan included three missions and a presidio for the channel, of which settlements San Buenaventura was to be at the southern end and La Purísima at the northern end somewhere in the vicinity of Point Concepción.[1] Although instructions to found these establishments were given in the regulations published in 1781,

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1. F. Neve, Reglamento é instrucción para los presidios de la península de California, erección de nuevas misiones, y fomento del pueblo y extensión de los establecimientos de Monterey, part 15.

preparations were delayed for some years, due to a quarrel between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The friars simply refused to found any mission until the controversy was settled.

About 1764, matters were cleared and preparations were once more made toward the settlement of the coast region. To survey the land for the northernmost mission, which was to be called La Purísima Concepción, a party was dispatched to explore possible sites. In June, 1765, Governor Fages reported that the most suitable locality was on the Santa Rosa River - now called the Santa Inés. Since news traveled slowly, a year passed before orders were received from Mexico confirming the survey and calling for the establishment of the mission. Then a second survey to fix the exact site, together with more preparations, caused so much delay that it was not until December, 1787, that the spot was actually consecrated. On the eighth of the month Father Lasuén, president of the missions in Alta California, celebrated mass and blessed the spot and the cross which had been erected to mark the site.[2] Although that day is considered as the anniversary date, yet actual work

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2. From the title page of the baptismal register for La Purísima, reproduced in Z. Engelhardt, Misión La Concepción Purísima de María Santísima, 6-7.

on the buildings was not started for several months. The rainy season effectively prevented all attempts at labor.

By March, 1788, all seemed propitious: Sergeant Pablo Antonio Cota, with troops and laborers, started construction of shelters to house the mission guard and the fathers. At the beginning of April, President Lasuén returned with the goods for the mission and two resident missionaries whom he had assigned to the new establishment, Fathers Vicente Fuster and Joseph Arroita. Sergeant Cota was enjoined by his commander, the governor, always to exercise great caution and to maintain harmonious relations with the missionaries. He was ordered to be circumspect in his dealings with the natives and to treat them with kindness, because the primary aim of the conquest was the christianization of the Indians.[3]

The relations with the Indians had more than justified the location of the new mission by the end of 1788. The Indians received the fathers with unusual kindness and willingness.[4] The first baptism registered occurred as early as April 9, and at the end of the year ninety-five baptisms

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3. P. Feges, Ordenes generales que debe observar el sargento encargado de la escolta de la nueva Misión de la Purísima Concepción, 1788.
4. A. L. Kroeber, Handbook of the Indians of California, 551.

had been entered by the resident missionaries. Marriages also were frequent. There was no death until early in 1789. That same pleasing proportion of baptisms to deaths - for in the other missions white man's diseases played havoc with the unresistant native - was maintained throughout the next decade. The result was that "this was the largest proportional gain and the smallest death-rate in California." 5 By 1800, the number of neophytes in the community at Misión La Purísima equaled about 960.

Records for the building activities of the mission during the first few years are extremely vague or nonexistent. From references in later reports and from the normal procedure which it was necessary to carry out, it is evident that there was construction going on all the time. A chapel and some sort of shelter for the missionaries were required, as were quarters for the soldier guards. It is probable that as families were formed by the neophytes, cabins were built to house them. Implements and goods had to be sheltered from the weather, as did supplies.

However, definite statistics, beginning with the year 1794, are available. It was a busy year. The soldiers

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5. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 675.

were housed in newly constructed quarters which measured about thirty-eight feet in length and about seventeen feet in width. A warehouse was added also for storage, the dimensions of which were not given. Two new rooms were constructed of adobe and roofed with tile but to what they were added is uncertain. Evidently, by that time there was one main building in the establishment; records show a corridor of brick added to it.

For the next six years construction work continued apace. With the increase in neophytes, building expansion was, naturally, to follow. More houses were needed to shelter new converts. Greater harvests, a necessity brought about by increase in the number of persons to be fed, meant more storehouses. Altogether, six store-rooms and granaries were newly built before 1800. The fathers' quarters were rebuilt and enlarged.[6]

The friars had come to California to save the souls of the Gentile population, but they had an intensely practical point of view concerning the matter. They knew that they would have to support the Indians, or rather teach them to provide for their own support. It was too much merely to expound the fundamentals of faith and

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6. Engelhardt, Purísima, 8-11.

expect the converts to follow the new teachings if they returned to their previous surroundings and atmosphere. They would have to realize a material reward. In addition, the friars acknowledged that they were trying to fit the natives for a place in a civilized community. Therefore, their task was to teach the Indians crafts and agriculture, which would enable them to take a place in the changing economic system.

It was in the first decade that the friars laid the foundation for the material - as well as spiritual - prosperity of Misión La Purísima. Their reports on agriculture show that progress was excellent, especially in wheat. The peak was reached in 1799, when the harvest in that grain was 2,500 fanegas or about 4,000 bushels.[7] There were five agricultural foodstuffs usually included in the annual reports of the friars from the Californian missions - wheat, barley, corn, beans and peas. For some reason, which evidence at hand does not explain, the plantings in barley, corn, beans and peas were not as heavy in proportion to wheat as at the other missions. Neither were the harvests what they should have been, especially in barley and peas; the records are incomplete on these two com-

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7. One fanega is equal to about 1.6 bushels.

modities also. The yield in corn and beans might be considered fair. In 1800, only one fanega of each crop was planted; 150 fanegas of corn and eighty-five fanegas of beans were reaped.

Of the animals raised at La Purísima, by far the most important were cattle, sheep and horses. Naturally there was a very small beginning in the breeding of these animals, for the fathers started out in 1787 with only eighty-three cattle, 166 sheep and forty-six horses. By 1800 the vaqueros were guarding sizable herds; 1,600 cattle and 250 horses were wearing the mission brand. Herdsmen watched over flocks of sheep which aggregated 4,000. The fathers had indeed been industrious.[8]

In the crafts, instruction had been going on all the time. The fathers reported in 1798 that the chief industry was weaving. They mention the making of cotton cloth, but present evidence does not state whether the cotton was raised locally or not. The friars noted in addition, and probably with some pride, that shoes were being made in the mission shops.

There was one interesting item during the early

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8. The statistics are taken from the tables in Engelhardt, Purísima, appen. C, 130-131.

years which should be noted. The missionaries were trying to break all of the former habits of the neophytes, but there was one which was not destroyed nor is any reason given. In a questionnaire sent to the missions in 1797, the fathers at Purísima stated that in addition to the daily rations of atole, pozole and meat the Indians were allowed to gather seeds in season.[9] These were the wild seeds upon which they had largely subsisted before the advent of the Spaniards. It is an interesting conjecture as to whether the farms were not large enough to support the neophytes or whether the Indians refused to give up their native dishes.[10]

After 1800, there was a period of prosperity for twelve years. During that time the mission grew, in influence and in size. In 1804 there were about 1,520 neophytes living in and around the community. This was the greatest number ever reached at La Purísima. From that time forward the number dropped steadily and there was a valid reason for it. The Gentile Indians along the coast by that date were all converted and there were no large groups of adult converts to swell the ranks of the neophytes as death slowly thinned them.

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9. Atole is cornmeal gruel; pozole is a dish of corn and meat.
10. Engelhardt, Purísima, 13 and 15.

It was during this time that the architectural aspirations of the padres began to be realized. Although unmentioned in the records, it is known that a new church was completed sometime in 1802. It was made of adobe, was fairly large, and evidently showed some aspiration towards splendor. Another wing had been added to the main structure and in 1804 a new building was put up which also was large. It consisted of a new guardhouse and five other apartments, each with a kitchen. The whole structure surrounded a good sized patio.

An ambitious construction plan was finished in 1805 with the completion of the irrigation system. Water was received from Salsperde Creek about three miles away from the mission proper. A dam was built across the streambed to keep the flow constant and preserve water for the dry years. Cement-lined pipes were the aqueduct which carried the life-giving fluid to the mission and fields. It was used for irrigation purposes and for domestic consumption.[11]

Misfortune seems to have been the keynote of Misión Purísima; it seems to have had more than its share

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11. R. Newcomb, The old mission churches and historic houses of California, their history, architecture, art, and lore, 238.

of trouble. By the year 1812, the padres at the mission were indubitably congratulating themselves on the progress of the establishment. But in that year came disaster in the form of an earthquake. At about 10 o'clock in the morning of December 21, a terrific shock occurred which lasted for four minutes. Before the terrified fathers and neophytes had had time to investigate the losses, a second shock completed the work of the previous one.[12] The extent of the damage was summed up in the annual report by the resident padres:[13]

> The ... horrible earthquake ... entirely destroyed the church and vestry, buried under the walls ... the greater part of furniture. The vestments have not suffered because they were inside the cases. Some of the work shops went down, but some more strongly built, may serve as habitations if not for minor uses which require no such security. One hundred houses of neophyte Indians and the Pozolera or community kitchen, the walls of which were an adobe and a half thick and roofed with tiles, have become inserviceable (sic). The garden walls of adobe. covered with tiles, have either collapsed or threaten to fall. The damaged portion will scarcely afford material for rebuilding. The furni-

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12. G. W. James, In and out of the old missions of California, an historical and pictorial account of the Franciscan missions, 203.
13. Report found in Engelhardt, Purísima, 30-31.

> ture and other contents of the mission have likewise suffered; some of the contents are entirely crushed, some are broken and all are damaged.

As though the earthquake were not enough to cause damage, the weather insisted on taking its toll. Following the seismic disturbances came torrents of rain which in turn brought on disastrous floods. Not only were the padres kept from repairing the ruins, but the water completed the devastation of the establishment. Rough shelters of poles which were thatched with grass and tules were thrown together to protect the shivering refugees. However, the disaster was not as bad as it might have been - only the buildings of the mission were destroyed. The crops and the animals, the material wealth, still existed and prospered.

So bad was the condition of the buildings, though, the missionaries felt it would be impossible to restore them. Undoubtedly the padres were discouraged at the aspect of the once beautiful establishment. Therefore, they determined to change the locality of the mission site entirely, and in March, 1813, they sent a petition to the president of the missions and the governor asking permission so to do. They declared that the new site was more favorable in every way and it seems that they were correct. It was near wood, stone, larger areas suitable for cultivation, better chance for irrigation, and on <u>El Camino Real</u>. It was only about

five miles from the old position. Permission was granted and construction began immediately. Little is known of the progress of the building, although by the end of the first year the people were still living in thatched huts. The church, even though made of wood, was faced with adobe.

After 1815, permanent structures were mentioned in the reports. In the new location, the padres seemed to favor size when they did build. During that year a structure was erected which was one hundred varas - nearly 300 feet - in length.[14] The walls were about thirty inches in thickness. An adobe partition ran the full length of the building, dividing it into two rows of rooms. In it were the chapel, guest rooms, the padres' quarters, and the workshops. In the next year a similar edifice was built, 100 varas long but only six varas wide, with twenty-inch walls. The roof was tiled and a corridor or covered porch extended along front and back. There were situated guard-house, weaving rooms, carpenter shop and quarters for the mayordomo. Another structure half as long was made for an infirmary. Señora Guadalupe Briones was placed in charge at a salary of five dollars a month and maintenance.[15] All of the temporary huts and shelters had constantly to be repaired. Much

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14. A vara is equal to about 2.8 feet.
15. Engelhardt, Purísima, 40-41.

space in the reports is used for items concerning that type of work.

Dark days seemed to fall upon La Purísima Mission after the earthquake, although its prosperity apparently increased. From the very beginning of the new establishment, the padres were handicapped because of matters far outside of their control. With the revolution in Mexico and the rest of the Hispanic American countries, which broke out in 1810, irregularities in the sending of supplies for California began, and finally all shipments ceased. Among the first things which were held up were the yearly stipends, $400, of the missionaries. Since a great part of the sum would have been spent for the mission, the lack was a blow to the fathers' hopes. But there was a far more serious result of the revolt, so far as the missions were concerned. The soldiers of Alta California were paid from Mexico and the presidios were supplied from there. Salaries and supplies automatically stopped when the government began to fight for its very life. The soldiers had to live, and their families had to be clothed and fed; there was only one source to which the provincial government could turn, and that was the missions. At first the demands on the missions were infrequent, but in a few years they were supporting the entire provincial force.[16]

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16. Bancroft, II, 195-197.

At first the mission seemed to have an increased prosperity but it was forced and false. Although they had more abundant harvests and increased flocks and herds, neither the mission nor the neophytes profited by the greater production. Before 1821, the quartermasters of the different presidios and the governor gave, in return for food and clothes, drafts on the royal treasury. The missionaries were afraid that these were not going to be honored and they were correct in their assumption. After 1821, the Mexican Republic was responsible for the province. However, it was poor and it did not see why it should assume additional responsibilities which the missions were caring for so well. The missions continued to support the soldiers. Following are some examples which Father Payeras reported:[17]

> On October 27, I sent to the habilitación (quartermaster) four fanegas of beans at twenty reales a fanega. On the last of December I sent fifty blankets each at fourteen reales, and fifty pairs of shoes at twelve reales each.
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> On June 27th, I sent to the habilitación sixty-four serapes, twenty-five of which were dyed red, at $4.50 each, and the rest at $4.25 each. I also sent four hides dressed white which at $20 each are worth $80. On October 5, I delivered $300 in silver to Ensign Meytorena for the habilitación.

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17. Engelhardt, Purísima, 47.

Other disasters occurred during these years. A water system for irrigation and domestic use was completed at the new site. Even with this aid, however, during the dry years the padres were hard put to it to maintain their animals and crops. In the winter of 1816-1817 came one of the driest years recorded and the mission suffered. The sheep especially were affected; hundreds died from lack of feed.[18]

The very next year fire took its toll. It evidently was a blaze which the small efforts of the padres and their charges were unable to control. Most of the neophytes' huts were destroyed. Not until after a year of constant effort were the effects repaired.

After this catastrophe, several years rolled by with little of interest, outside of daily labor and occurrences, happening. Then Father Payeras died. His had been the guiding hand at La Purísima since 1804. It had been his indomitable courage which had strengthened weakening resolution after the earthquake, and he had been chiefly responsible for the quick growth of the mission on the new site. In 1815 he had been made president of the Franciscans in California, but he had stayed at Purísima as his home mission rather than

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18. James, Old missions, 204.

go to Carmel. Misión Purísima basked in reflected glory during these years. In April, 1823, he laid down his duties for the last time. It is probable that his influence, had he been alive to exercise it, would have ameliorated the conditions of the next year, if not prevented them, at least at Purísima. In 1824 occurred the famous Indian revolts at Santa Inés, Santa Barbara and La Purísima.

Many reasons have been given for the outbreak, all of which have some bearing on the case although each does not answer the whole question as the authors hoped. The Franciscan fathers were convinced that the discontent was caused by the necessity of laboring hard to support the troops without any recompense - the pay being the annual remesas sent from Mexico each year in the early days. This, coupled with the exacting attitude of the mission guards, was the tinder from which the flame started.[19] The lay writers took a different viewpoint. They declared that the Indians had tired of the white man's yoke and wanted to free the country of his hated presence.[20] That there was discontent is proved from another source.[21]

> The Chumash (the Indians of the Santa Barbara coast) accepted the

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19. Engelhardt, Purísima, 49.
20. J. B. Alvarado, Historia de California, II, 47.
21. Kroeber, Handbook, 551.

> Spaniards with unusual kindliness. But the subjugation which the residence of the superior people entailed broke their spirit and produced a deep inward depression, which manifested itself in the alarming spread of the practice of abortion and as late as 1824 fanned itself into a feeble and timid flame of insurrection at three of the missions.

The missionaries realized that something was wrong, because Father Payeras wrote in 1810:[22]

> What beyond measure has exercised our patience in this year, and has grieved us deeply, is to see that the majority of the pregnant women have produced still-born babies.... In the beginning it was attributed to the inconveniences of child-bearing. In order to prevent such occurrences, steps were taken to instruct them and to preach to them, and sometimes to punish them suitably; but down to the present time all this has been in vain. At the same time we have not been able to discover the origin and motive of such deplorable happenings.

Undoubtedly both viewpoints have some truth, because the immediate cause was laid to the flogging of a neophyte at Santa Inés. There seems no evidence that more Indians than those at the three missions were asked to join, but the revolt localized at only three.

The beginning of the uprising was at Santa Inés

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22. Found in Engelhardt, Purísima, 21-28.

on the afternoon of February 21, but it was put down next day. At Purísima the rebellion began the same day as at Santa Inés. The mission soldier guards under Corporal Tapia successfully defended themselves, their families and the fathers during the afternoon and night. In the morning, however, their powder was exhausted and they hed to surrender. Allowing the soldiers, their families and Father Ordaz to withdraw to Santa Inés, the Indians kept Father Rodriguez with them although they did him no injury. There had been no casualties during the night on the part of the besieged group. Four whites, presumably visitors who knew nothing of the revolt, were killed as they approached, as were seven neophytes.[23]

Nearly a month passed before the Indians were attacked by the white troops, and they used the time to put the place in a position for defense. They cut loop-holes in walls of the mission buildings and erected palisades for protection. They also mounted two old swivel guns which had been used for saluting on feast days. Exhortations to other missions and Gentile Indians seem to have brought in few recruits except from Santa Inés. Total numbers have been given anywhere from 150 to about 400.

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23. Bancroft, II, 509.

In the meantime, the government had been gathering its forces, and a troop of 100 men under Lieutenant Estrada was sent from Monterey to coöperate with a force at Santa Barbara. In some way they did not make a junction, and on March 16 Estrada appeared before Purísima. First of all he despatched two bodies of horse, one to the right and one to the left, to surround the mission and cut off the retreat of the foe; then he attacked with musket fire and a four-pounder. Soon it was apparent that the fire of the rebel neophytes was mostly ineffectual. It was not long before they tried to retreat but found they were cut off by the flanking horsemen. At last they turned to Father Rodriguez, asking that he intercede for them. He did, first by letter, then in person. The battle had lasted about two and a half hours. The casualties had been light on the Californian side: only three wounded, one mortally. Among the neophytes the losses were fairly heavy; sixteen were killed and many more wounded.

The Californian officers had been authorized to sentence the culprits on the spot. After depositions were taken, seven Indians were executed for the murder of the four whites during the first night of the revolt. Four ringleaders were sentenced to ten years of hard labor at the presidios and perpetual exile. Eight more were given

eight years of hard labor.[24]

It was not long before La Purísima settled back into the even tenor of every-day routine. The neophytes did not make any attempt to run away as a result of the disastrous finale to the revolt but returned to the business of living and raising crops. The next year matters had progressed so that a new church was dedicated. As far as is known this was the last real construction done before secularization, although repair work was going on continually.

Only one more episode remains to be told concerning Misión La Purísima Concepción: that is the secularization of the mission and its lands. The subject of the secularization of the California missions has been told so well and thoroughly that it is useless to recapitulate here. Suffice it to say that the idea was in full accord with the primary function of the mission system, to fit the Indian for a place in a new economic régime. The republican and democratic ideals of the Mexican revolution demanded that it proceed immediately. It met the entire approval of the lay population in California, because they would be the ones to benefit by the transformation. After several surveys and

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24. There are many good accounts of this revolt. The following are three: Bancroft, California, II, 529-533; Engelhardt, Purísima, 50-54 (Estrada's official report is translated here); Alvarado, Historia, II, 47-57.

preliminary attempts by different governors, Figueroa in 183[illegible] began the real secularization.

At La Purísima, the first commissioner for the government was Domingo Carrillo. At the beginning of the next year, 1835, an inventory was taken which gave a total value to the mission and its property of $60,757.67. From the time of its secularization the history of Purísima was a sad one, for it was a tale of the mission's rapid decline and of enrichment for the commissioners who administered its wealth. It passed through the hands of several such administrations until, in 1839, Hartnell, recently appointed inspector of the missions, made another inventory. The value of the property had declined about two-thirds and there was a total of more than $3,000 in debts outstanding. There were only 122 Indians left of the mission community, besides forty-seven freed neophytes on one of the ranchos.[25]

By 1841-1842 the mission was practically in ruins, according to the account of the French traveler Duflot de Mofras. In 1843, Governor Micheltorena stopped exploitation of some of the missions by his decree restoring the temporalities to the friars. There seems to be no record of the decayed state of Purísima, or what happened, up until 1845. In

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25. Engelhardt, Purísima, 56-60.

that year Governor Pío Pico completed the secularization of the missions by selling them outright at auction. Purísima was one of the first three to go under the hammer. On December 4, 1845, it was sold to John Temple for $1,100. Thus came to an end one of the five missions for the defense of the Santa Barbara const.

Although it was dead so far as its spiritual functions were concerned, it lived on in memories. The ruins were acquired later by several American families, who used the main building - at least one end of it - for residence. Also, at one time part of this same building was utilized as a saloon. The deterioration was fearfully rapid, however. When Helen Hunt Jackson went through the country about forty years later, she said:[26]

> The most desolate ruin of all is that of La Purísima mission .... Nothing is left there but one long, low adobe building with a few arches of the corridor; the doors stand open, the roof is falling in: it has been so often used as a stable and sheepfold that the grasses are killed around it. The painted pulpit hangs half falling on the wall, its stairs are gone, and its sounding board is slanting awry. Inside the broken

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26. H. H. Jackson, Glimpses of California and the missions, 93-94.

> altar rail is a pile of stones, earth, and rubbish thrown up by seekers after buried treasures: in the farther corner another pile and hole, the home of a badger; mud-swallows' nests are thick on the cornice, and cobwebbed rags of the old canvas ceiling hang fluttering overhead. The only trace of the ancient cultivation is a pear-orchard a few rods off, which must have been a splendid sight in its day; it is at least two hundred yards square, with a double row of trees all around, so placed as to leave between them a walk fifty or sixty feet wide. Bits of broken aqueduct here and there, and a large, round stone tank overgrown by grass, showed where the life of the orchard used to flow in. It has been many years slowly dying of thirst. Many of the trees are gone, and those that remain stretch out gaunt and shrivelled boughs, which though still bearing fruit, look like arms tossing in vain reproach and entreaty; a few pinched blossoms seemed to heighten rather than lessen their melancholy look.

After some years the Union Oil Company of California acquired the property, and offered to "deed it to trustees as an historic monument, provided the State would restore it along the original lines."[27] Although the offer was not accepted at first, within the last two or three years the State has reconsidered. At present there is excavation going on - which has uncovered foundations of buildings not known to have existed - in addition to the work of restora-

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27. Rider, Guide, 323.

tion. Only the main edifice, the so-called monastery, is being worked on. There are at present no plans for restoration of others.

The chapel in the main building, in which visitors today make their obeisances, has long been considered the church of the establishment. It is this chapel which most writers of modern times have described as the main place of worship for the mission; but records show and excavation has proved that there was a real church, set off by itself, which disappeared under rubbish and debris.

When the main work of restoration has been finished, this mission of La Purísima will take its place as a State monument, one more in the growing list of historic shrines in California.

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