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SAN BERNARDINO ASISTENCIA

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SAN BERNARDINO ASISTENCIA

San Bernardino Asistencia might well have been considered a failure in its early years. Three great visions it pursued, and each was unfulfilled. Plans, first for a rancho, then for a mission, and finally for a second Salt Lake City, were abandoned. Not until a new era, based on a firmer foundation and more happy fortune, did San Bernardino fulfill the promise of its potentialities. Less visionary and dramatic, but more successful, a prosperous modern town finishes the saga begun by padres, soldiers, and idealistic adventurers.

At the end of the first decade of the 1800's, Father Dumetz, who was living as supernumerary at San Gabriel, took an interest in the place called San Bernardino. Since the early travelers from Mexico usually went by way of the Colorado desert to San Gabriel, a station was necessary nearer to the border of what is now California in order to supply food and aid. Furthermore, few places were better suited to form ranchos to supplement the production of the mission.

Consequently, Fr. Dumetz with the aid of some troops and a few neophytes, that is, Christian Indians, made his way to the well watered valley of the Guachama Indians, known to him as San Bernardino. A chapel and a station were erected

at a place called Politana, and a quantity of supplies left to support the Indian stewards. It was an excellent beginning and one which promised great success. Fr. Dumetz undoubtedly felt satisfaction as he visioned the flourishing rancho which he never doubted would develop in that place.[1] Flocks, herds, produce, converts - the future was limitless!

Upon one thing he had not counted and that was native hostility. The Indians had appeared so friendly that an uprising seemed unlikely, but it was always the least expected which overthrew plans made for San Bernardino. In a short while the Indians became suspicious of the new undertaking; began blaming it for their ills; and finally, in the heat of a passion bred almost of panic, they descended with elemental fury upon the little post, completely overwhelming and destroying it. As the few survivors fled, terrorized, towards San Gabriel, the flame-tinted sky behind prophesied the tragic decades which followed.

Some years passed, and the incident at Politana gradually faded from memory. Misión San Gabriel Arcangel had become an old and accepted institution. Fear of the padres disappeared as the neophytes continued to visit their relations among the Gauchama Indians and to tell of the ad-

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1. R. McRoskey, The missions of California, 168.

vantage of mission life. At last the natives suggested that a settlement by the missionaries among them would be acceptable, and once more the project of an important rancho, or asistencia, in San Bernardino Valley was taken up by the friars at San Gabriel.

In 1819 the undertaking was begun, and by 1820 the new chapel and ranch buildings were ready for use. The chapel was dedicated to San Bernardino of Sienna, and the new community began. A zanja or ditch was dug for irrigation. Wheat, grapes and olives were planted. Cattle and other livestock were put to graze in the valley. It all required a great deal of work, as for instance the zanja which was dug by a large crew of Indians using no other tools than the shoulder blades of cattle. The result was so good, however, that later settlers mistook the ditch for a natural water course, which error took several long court battles to correct.

San Bernardino was in a fair way to become a success at last. The Indians were not only peaceful, but cooperative. Crops were growing well; improvements were rapidly appearing; and the twofold purpose of the asistencia, of being an aid to the older mission San Gabriel and of assisting in the conversion of the natives was no longer a dream, but an actuality. However, the padres were not content with leaving San Bernardino in the simple role of rancho.

It was decided to make something more ambitious out of the asistencia - a mission!

For some years the Franciscan missionaries had been considering a new and sweeping program. That was nothing less than the establishment of a new chain of missions. After a generation of activity by the series of missions along the coast, conditions had become fairly stable. Practically all of the Indians were converted, and the institutions were going concerns. Towards the interior, though, it was a different story. There the Indians remained in their wild state and were a constant menace to the missions. In order to curb the depredations and annoyances which the un-Christianized Indians were constantly giving them, no better method could be found by the padres than to form new institutions farther to the east, convert and subjugate those natives, and continue the process until the Indian problem no longer should exist. San Bernardino was chosen as one of the first steps in that program.

As a consequence, Fr. Presidente Payeras and a party, among which was Padre José Sanchez who kept a diary of the event, made an exploration tour in search of possible new mission sites. During the course of their journey, they arrived at San Bernardino. The report left was as favorable as ever to the establishment of a mission there. They first inspected the region known to the natives as Jubuval, which

was the part of the valley lying between what is now City Creek on the east, Santa Ana River on the south, and Lytle Creek on the west. The country was found to have sufficient water and good pasturage. On towards the mountains they remarked a "steaming body of warm water about a quarter of a league in length." This was caused by what at present are the Harlem Springs. Drainage during more recent years, however, has dried up the swamp, over which at times was a large bank of fog.

Next the party turned to the southeast and inspected the zanja.[2] Sanchez recorded:

> We turned and recrossed the river. Beyond a rock-strewn plain towards the east there is a large water ditch which has been made for the missionaries of San Gabriel by a certain Pedro Alvarez in order to irrigate the lands which they now have under cultivation, all kinds of seeds being sown.

The padres gathered the Indians together, and asked them if they would like to have a mission established there. The natives replied favorably. Later, mass was said and at the request of Carlos García, the majordomo of the asistencia, two old women and an old man who were seriously ill were instructed and baptized. After this act of piety and

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2. Quoted in G. W. Beattie, "San Bernardino Valley in the Spanish Period," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, XII, 15.

repairs. Other glimpses of the life of the times show the Indian boys wading in the zanja or hunting rabbits with their bows and arrows in company with the few Spanish children of the settlement.[4]

At the asistencia was a large adobe building which was used as the home of the majordomo and which contained a granary. Added to it was an enramoda, or structure of boughs, which served as a chapel. The majordomo had charge of the routine of the rancho, while periodically the padres would visit it in order to hold services and to make their inspections. Near the main building were the huts of the Indians. Testimony to the prosperity of the establishment was given by Harrison G. Rogers, the chronicler who accompanied Jedediah Smith on an expedition which arrived at San Gabriel late in 1826. On their departure early in 1827, Father Sanchez gave them an order on San Bernardino for supplies. The steward complied with the order as soon as it was presented to him. Smith was given corn, peas, parched meal and wheat flour, and allowed to kill and dry a quantity of beef, for which Jedediah Smith, who was without provisions, was grateful.[5]

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4. Beattie, "San Bernardino," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, XII, 19.
5. H. C. Dale, The Ashley-Smith explorations and the discovery of a central route to the Pacific, 1822-1829, 224-228.

For a decade San Bernardino prospered. In 1831, however, a terrible set-back occurred. The desert Indians, who were ancient enemies of the Guachamas, raided the asistencia. No provisions had been made to repulse such an attack; so the result was disastrous. The buildings were destroyed, the cattle scattered or stolen, and the defenders driven into confusion. It was another link in the chain of tragic circumstances which laid such a blighting influence over San Bernardino.

Failure this time was not admitted. New and larger buildings were constructed, and the asistencia once more defied its bad fortune. Its appearance was very much like that of a fort. Stone foundations were used upon which were erected walls three feet thick. The principal structure was 250 feet long, 125 feet wide, and 20 feet high. All was so built as to form the usual patio, closed in the back by a high adobe wall in which was a gateway of sufficient dimensions to allow horses, vehicles, and other large objects to pass. Across the east and west ends were two long porches. There was a corral for livestock, and a granary for storing grain. The whole was sufficiently formidable looking to discourage attack from the desert Indian.[6]

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6. J. Caballeria, History of San Bernardino Valley from the padres to the pioneers, 67-68.

As secularization plans ripened into actuality, peace fled from the asistencia. Governmental attacks on the status of the missions fanned the Indian restlessness. Responsible also were a group of colonists sent out from Mexico under the leadership of Híjar and Padrés, usually called the Híjar colony. Among these men were a few misguided and restless spirits who were constantly causing dissension. One of these, a certain Lieutenant Aranjo, was strongly implicated in stirring up the natives. The desert Indians proved to be especially inflammable material in the hands of the agitators.

In October 1834, the next blow fell. The Indians from the desert, combined with a few in the valley, attacked the asistencia. The holy vessels were stolen and the defenders besieged. As soon as a messenger could get through to San Gabriel, help was sent, although it proved ineffective. At last Padre Estenega rode to the scene of the disturbance in order to persuade the savages to leave in peace. Fr. Estenega was promptly taken captive and for a while there was great fear that he had been killed. The Indians were reluctant, however, to execute so powerful a "medicine man," and, after some persuasion, relinquished their captive and withdrew.

In a short time, however, they returned to the attack more violently then ever. In December, warriors descended on San Bernardino killing and burning everything

they could. The buildings were sacked and left but smoking shells of their former state. Many of the inhabitants of the valley were killed, wounded, or captured. The remainder took refuge in San Gabriel. For the next two months there was great excitement and constant alarm.[7] Nothing but despair and disappointment seemed to come to the smiling, inviting valley of San Bernardino.

As a rancho and an asistencia of San Gabriel, San Bernardino had a measure of success. The crops and livestock it produces, as well as the Indians it helped to Christianize, made it of great assistance to Misión San Gabriel. The great dreams of Father Payéras, however, never materialized. At the time when the plans were laid, there was no really valid reason why San Bernardino should not become the seat of a resident missionary, and an industrious center which would draw pagan Indians for many miles around, feed them, clothe them, civilize them, and Christianize them. This, in spite of the moves to secularize the older missions, surely the opportunity was there. Even the Indian depredations might have been overcome. However, the unforeseen came when secularization took the turn it did. Swiftness, force and hostility between the secular and church authorities gave what was intended to be a natural development a destructive

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7. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, III, 359-360.

conclusion which almost put an end to missionary endeavor in California. Thus, through forces beyond its control or influence, San Bernardino's aim as one of the great missions in the inland chain failed utterly.

For nearly eight years, the asistencia was practically abandoned. A shadowy control was exercised by the secular administration of San Gabriel. Some of the old Indians wandered back and took up their abode, as formerly, around the deserted buildings. Almost everything was left in the hands of circumstances. Materials from the buildings were carried off. Squatters settled where they would. The Indian congregation was left without priest or leader. Regular settlers were slow to take up land and develop it where the Indians had shown themselves to be so warlike and hostile.

Eventually a few ranchers moved into the valley, and finally old Señor Don Antonio María Lūgo, in 1841, petitioned the government for a grant which included the former asistencia. Don Antonio's herds had grown too large for his holdings around Los Angeles. He asked for the grant in the name of his three sons, José del Carmen, José María and Vicente, and a nephew, Diego Sepulveda. In June, 1842, the grant was issued, whereupon Don Antonio stocked the new holdings with the surplus from his own herds, and the Lugo boys took charge. José del Carmen made his home in

the old asistencia buildings. At that time the roof and two sides of the building had fallen, but the rest was in good condition.[8]

For almost a decade, the Lugos dominated San Bernardino Valley. They were the largest landowners and the most active in keeping peace and order. They early acquired a very important ally for their endeavors in the person of the outstanding Indian chief of the region, Juan Antonio. In 1844, one of the ranchers, Waters, gave a big barbecue which was attended by the whites along with Juan Antonio and his retinue. Through the mellowing influence of good food, laughter, and, in all probability, some excellent brandy, everyone became very friendly. A council was held in which all pledged their aid in fighting off the wild marauders of the desert. Juan Antonio took his promise seriously and ever afterward rode with the Lugos when trouble arose.

Juan Antonio was a very valuable ally. His influence over the powerful Cahuilla tribe was unbounded. They gave him the respect ordinarily accorded to a prince of royal blood. Juan Antonio was about five feet four inches tall, thick, stout, and wiry. He had a lion-like head, a dignified manner, and was always accompanied by medicine men and a

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8. Caballeria, San Bernardino, 82-83; Beattie, California unbuilt missions, 45.

mounted guard of ten or twelve armed men. Even four years after the United States invasion, in 1850, when San Bernardino had been organized by the whites, Juan Antonio's prestige was such that he could ride up to the jail and demand one of his people who was imprisoned for murder, make good his request, and execute the criminal after the Indian fashion. In 1863, he died of smallpox at the age of eighty, revered by his people and respected by the whites.[9]

Until the early 1850's, the Lugos, with the help of Juan Antonio and the neighboring ranchers, kept a rude kind of law and order. Marauding Indians were punished and criminals hunted down. It was one of the wildest and most violent periods in the history of San Bernardino. That settlement and development was possible at all was largely due to the Lugos. Authority still centered around the old San Gabriel asistencia.

Yet one more great design was in store for San Bernardino, before it was broken up into its thousands of individual worlds represented in the families of United States settlers, who made what is now known as San Bernardino. It was another church enterprise, but this time it was the Mormon Church. Brigham Young, the president of the church, undertook to create a large Mormon empire. It was planned

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9. M. T. Wolcott, "The Lugos and their Indian ally," Touring topics, XXI, 12:22-24.

to include all of the great basin and extend as far as San Diego in California. He hoped to bring, by way of the Pacific, to San Diego and on to Salt Lake the thousands of converts whom his missionaries sent. In its entirety, his program comprehended settling a large part of the western part of the United States; establishing regular communication with important gathering places, such as England, by means of one of the isthmuses of Central America or over the Pacific, and collecting his people in through a series of settlements from San Diego to central Utah and Nevada. In this system, San Bernardino was chosen as one of the main receiving points and as a metropolis rivaled only Salt Lake. That, then, was the project which became known as the famous "Mormon corridor." How far Brigham Young planned on annexing territory is little known, but at least he intended to establish a state within a state ruled by the laws and precepts of the Mormon Church.

The first move towards San Diego was taken in February, 1851, when Brigham Young and his counselors blessed and set apart Apostles Amaca M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich "to take a company to Southern California to preside over affairs of the Church in that land, and to establish a stronghold for the gathering of the Saints."[10] By the

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10. Quoted in M. R. Hunter, Brigham Young the colonizer, 312-313.

middle of March, final instructions were given and Lyman and Rich set out with 520 persons for California. The destination was to be in the neighborhood of Williams' ranch, because of the glowing reports about the country which the Mormon Battalion - enlisted for the Mexican War - brought back.

Much latitude was given to Rich and Lyman. As a consequence they decided not to make any settlements along the way, but to concentrate their efforts in Southern California, and to work back from that base. By the end of June, the long line of wagons had rolled down into San Bernardino Valley. There they stopped. After two months of inspection and negotiations, Lyman and Rich consummated the purchase of 100,000 acres of the old Lugo grant at the asistencia. The sale price was 77,000 dollars which was financed by a San Francisco firm and paid in several installments. The deed was recorded on February 27, 1852.

For energy and resourcefulness, few settlers in the valley equaled the Mormons. A road was built up to the timber land in the mountains. In the early fall of 1851, the town was staked out under the direction of the apostles Lyman and Rich. The colonists were organized and assigned to their part of the purchase. However, the Mormons had scarcely settled down to their tasks of erecting homes and planting crops when their mettle was sorely tried

through an attack by the Indians.

After the withdrawal of the Lugos, the savages undoubtedly thought their depredations would go unchecked. They counted without the fighting quality of the Mormon people. The defenders put up such a desperate and hard-fought battle that the Indians were driven back convinced that they could not take the new settlement. Furthermore, they never attacked again. In the meantime, a messenger had been sent with all haste to get the aid of Captain Bean and a troop of United States Volunteers who were stationed on the coast. Bean advised that a stockade be erected. It was an exacting task, to be sure, coming at a period when time and energy were sorely needed for building shelter and preparing for crops. Nevertheless, under the direction of the church officials, an elaborate stockade was built. A space 300 feet wide and 700 feet long was enclosed by a wall made by splitting cottonwood and large willow logs, roughly facing them on the split side and hewing the edges so that they would fit together closely. The timbers were then stood upright and set three feet in the ground, projecting twelve feet high with the split side facing in. This was an effective protection against possible Indian raids. The west side of the fort was made up of the houses which had already been built by the settlers. These had been placed tightly together so as to form the wall. Inside the stockade rows of small, one-

story houses were built sixteen to eighteen feet apart.[11] The usual arrangements of gates and loopholes were made. Water was provided by Warm Creek and small wells.

A year later the leaders decided to dismantle the fort. By that time it had become evident that no more Indian disturbances were to be expected. Consequently, in order to get some use out of the logs before they rotted, the Mormons regretfully tore down the old stockade and used the materials for the construction of stores, houses and barns. After that, the settlement took on its more normal appearance as an ordinary small town. It was surveyed and laid out as a miniature Salt Lake City. It was one mile square, divided into blocks of about eight acres each. The streets were wide, each bordered by a ditch of water. This system of water supply proved to be inadequate, and recourse was had to wells.

Even though the Mormons were using a plan entirely different from anything previously employed, the old buildings of the asistencia were not abandoned. Bishop Tenny, one of the subordinates of Lyman and Rich, took up his residence there. He interested his people in constructing the Tenny ditch, which drew from the old zanja. Orchards and vineyards

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11. J. Brown, History of San Bernardino County, I, 40-41.

were planted. Also, Mrs. Tenny opened a school in part of the asistencia structure.

Improvement under the Mormons was rapid. Three sawmills were built in the mountains, which not only provided the settlement with sufficient timber but also supplied much for the Los Angeles market. A flour mill, good roads, irrigation ditches, and an impressive settlement of homes, stores, and public buildings were completed in the course of a few years. Growth was so rapid that by 1853 San Bernardino was made into a separate county with the Mormon center as the county seat. By 1854 the city had become incorporated, and the venture appeared to be a success.[12] Even a beginning in manufacturing came with the furniture factory of Lewis F. Cram near the old asistencia buildings. Power was furnished by the zanja and materials were found in the elders and willows which grew along the Santa Ana River.

Once more, however, failure attended the San Bernardino effort. Again it was not a matter of there being anything lacking at San Bernardino, but that the great and fateful forces had decreed against the undertaking. After years of controversy between the Mormon state and the national government, a body of troops, in 1857, was dispatched to Salt Lake. Brigham Young, not knowing how far the difficulties would lead,

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12. Bancroft, California, VI, 520-521.

felt obliged to recall his colonists. On October 30, a letter arrived at San Bernardino with the order. By that time more than 3,000 people had been collected there, and many farms had been developed and were being operated successfully. To write the whole venture off at one stroke seemed almost unthinkable. However, such was the loyalty of the Mormons to their leader that they never hesitated to obey. A very few, who were out of sympathy with some of Brigham Young's doctrines, chose to remain. The rest, by November 14, were making active preparations, and by December 15 the last entry dated in San Bernardino was made by the historian who had been appointed to keep a daily record of events in the colony.[13]

Liquidating so large an establishment in such a short time, especially since there were few purchasers, meant taking a great loss. A four-room house was sold for 40 dollars with a sack of sugar, a buggy, and a cloak added for good measure. Again, an improved farm which was producing well was exchanged for a camping outfit for the journey back. Since the loss was all absorbed by the individuals themselves, the courage and steadfast loyalty of Brigham Young's followers was seldom more graphically demonstrated.

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13. Hunter, Brigham Young, 319-321.

San Bernardino was left once more with only the memory of what had been.

A large part of the church property was put forth into the hands of Ebenezer Hanks, who had obtained a third interest in the rancho from Lyman and Rich. Later, in 1862, the property was sold to W. A. Conn, F. L. Tucker, Richard Allen, and Bethel Coopwood. Hanks then returned to Salt Lake, where he died. The land, which contained the buildings of the former asistencia, was sold to Dr. Benjamin Barton. For the next ten years, Dr. Barton made his home in the old adobe structures. After that, though, he moved his family to a new brick house a short distance away on what became known as Barton Hill. Dr. Barton was long one of San Bernardino's outstanding citizens. He was the first doctor and the first paid postmaster. He owned a drug store, some of the materials used in the building of which were taken from the ruins of the asistencia.

With the departure of the Mormons, San Bernardino fell into virtual oblivion. The countryside was deserted. Because of the decline in population,[14] the town was disincorporated in 1861 and did not receive a new charter until 1864.[14] A few changes came after the Mormons returned to

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14. Bancroft, California, VI, 521.

Utah, for several saloons sprang up, and most of the remaining stores fell into the hands of capitalists.[15] From the new start, San Bernardino rose again, and this time upon substantial foundations.

As for the asistencia, it was left in ruin. Each winter's rains further dissolved it into a shapeless mass of mud. It was fast becoming not only useless, but an unwelcome obstacle whose disintegrating walls made the ground around them less fertile. In 1915 it was described as follows:[16]

> One of our drives took us to the oldest orange groves in the section. The trees are over fifty years old and a foot in diameter; they are hale and strong, bearing profusely.... Near this grove a few shapeless heaps of adobe may be seen, remains of the branch founded here by padres from San Gabriel shortly after the establishment of that mission.

Thus only incidentally, with the main interest centered upon the ancient orchard, was the asistencia mentioned. It was fast being forgotten. The only insistent reminder of it was the fact that the orange trees nearest the old walls showed a marked inferiority. That was little enough evidence of the great dreams and golden hopes once entertained about the place. By 1925, hardly a vestige of the old establishment

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15. E. Bendel, Frontier life in the army, 1854-1861, 282-283.
16. T. D. Murphy, On sunset highways, a book of motor rambles in California, 86.

remained. It was evident that in only a few years nothing would be left of the ruins. Perhaps even the orange trees would eventually cease to be.

Vastly different, however, was the final outcome. Instead of becoming one of the most completely shattered of the California mission ruins, it is now one of the most accurately restored. The county of San Bernardino obtained possession of the site. The old records and descriptions were carefully scanned. Expert workmen were imported from Mexico to make the brick and tile. From all sides the masterly way in which the project was carried out was praised. The result was almost complete restoration. After so much drama, heartache and pathos, it would have been added misfortune if so historic and so interesting a monument had passed from man's mind. The saga of San Bernardino echoes in one's ears - beautiful, heroic, magnificent in failure.

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