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THE ADOBE CHAPEL of the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

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by

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THE ADOBE CHAPEL OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

The Chapel of the Immaculate Conception was the first church, Catholic or Protestant, to be established in Old Town, San Diego. It was, for many years, the only Catholic church in that town. The beginning of the Chapel is somewhat vague and the historical facts are difficult to establish with exactness.

At the time of the secularization of Misión San Diego, Father Vicente Oliva was in charge of that institution, which had the only church in that parish. He remained at that post until 1847. His place was taken by Father Juan Holbein, who used a room in the house of Don José Estudillo as a place of worship. The mission church was then occupied as a barracks by United States troops. The priest visited the mission regularly, however, until 1850. That year Don José Antonio Aguirre lent his house in Old Town for a place of worship.¹

August 24, 1850, Father Holbein secured from the city a deed for lot 1, block 88, for church purposes. Don Antonio Aguirre, Don Juan Bandini and Don Pedro J. de Pedreros were the trustees. September 29, 1851, Father

1. C. A. McGrew, City of San Diego, 244.

Holbein laid the cornerstone for an adobe church on that lot. Work was begun and part of the walls were erected, but the building was never finished.²

Father Holbein, according to an account of his venture, found it impossible to raise the money to finish his church. It is related that he offended a fraternal organization by aggressive opposition. A San Diego newspaper stated that he was illiberal and that he interfered with the education of the Old Town children. When the school trustees announced the opening of a school, Father Holbein denounced the action from his pulpit and forbade the members of his church to send their children to that school. This, with his attitude towards the fraternity, was offensive to the American population and his campaign for funds failed. He kept on striving but finally, in September, 1856, he left his post.³

On the same date, August 24, 1850, on which Father Holbein acquired the deed to his church lot, John Brown bought lot 1, in block 26, from the city. It is on this lot that the present adobe Chapel of the Immaculate Conception stands. Brown built an adobe house on it and he and his family lived there. One of his younger sons was born in

2. State historical landmark series archives, Landmark #49, Adobe Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, 1.

3. W. E. Smythe, History of San Diego, 537.

that house. Later, John Brown sold the place to Don José Antonio Aguirre. It was he who gave Father Holbein permission to use it for church services.⁴

Father Holbein was replaced by Father Marincovich, who remained only a very short time. His place was taken, in 1856, by Father Meinrich, who, a year after, was succeeded by Father Jaime Vila. A few months later came Father Juan Molinier to take charge of the parish and its improvised chapel. He it was who induced Don José Antonio Aguirre to rebuild or remodel his home into a place of worship. It was under his pastorate that the new church was consecrated, with high mass, on November 21, 1858. It was christened "Chapel of the Immaculate Conception." There was a great celebration following the mass, the San Diego Guards assisting and firing a salute. This was followed by a dinner and feast given by Don José Antonio Aguirre.⁵

The chapel stands on the southerly outskirts of Old Town. As reconstructed, it is a small adobe building about thirty-five feet long, fifteen feet wide, twelve feet high at the eaves and sixteen feet high at the ridge of the roof. The shallow sloping roof is shingled. The entrance to the chapel is on the west about ten feet from the south-

4. State historical landmark series archives, op. cit., 2.
5. Smythe, op. cit., 537.

ern end. The door is paneled, seven by three feet, and is of wood. On the west side the chapel has three small windows about eight feet above the floor, each one three feet high and two and a half feet wide. There is a window on either side of the door; the one on the right-hand side is about five feet from the south end, the one on the left almost in line with the frame of the door. The third window is about three feet from the north end of the chapel.

On the west side of the chapel, about sixteen feet from the south end, is the baptistry, a small room 11x8 feet, the shingled roof sloping to where it joins the side walls of the chapel. This room is lighted by a small window, similar to the others, on the west side. At present a small but vigorous pepper tree overgrows the whole western wall of the baptistry.

On the east side of the chapel, opposite the baptistry, is the sacristy, built of approximately the same length and height as the other room but about seven feet wide. It is lighted by a window on the east wall. A young date palm and some shrubs shield that side. At the south end of the chapel and several feet from the outside wall stand two large wooden posts about ten inches square and eight feet high. They are six feet apart and have a large crossbeam on top. In 1858, Father Molinier had two of the old bells of Misión San Diego brought to the chapel and

hung on that beam. There, for many years, they called the faithful to prayer. One of the bells was taken back to the mission. It has been in the bell tower of restored Misión San Diego since 1931.

In 1859, Father Molinier was replaced by Father Angel Molino, who stayed several years. He was succeeded by Fathers Vicente Llover and Miguel Duran. In 1866, the parish was taken over by Father Antonio D. Ubach. He continued to serve as its pastor for forty years, until his death, in March, 1907.

Father Ubach was a native of Catalonia, Spain. He was educated for a missionary priest at Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and traveled thousands of miles doing missionary work among the Indians of Western America. He went to San Diego in 1866. Soon after arriving, he received from the Church a special dispensation which allowed him to wear a beard. It is said that he had Moorish blood in his ancestry. After being in San Diego a short time, he imported an organ, the first one seen there since the one Vancouver brought to California in 1793. Father Ubach was a very democratic person and enjoyed making friends among the younger people. It is said that during the early years of his work in San Diego he played football with the boys in the plaza after the morning service, using a ball which he had provided. It is also said that he had the dagger of the

notorious bandit, Joaquin Murietta. Murietta, however, never operated that far south during the time he was a bandit; so it is impossible to say how the priest got his dagger, if the story is true. Father Ubach was the keeper of a number of mission relics such as vestments, sacred vessels, and record books from Misión San Diego.

José Antonio Aguirre, to whom the chapel first belonged, was a native of Vircaya, Spain, born about 1793. During the Mexican war of independence, he was living as a merchant in Guaymas, Sonora. Being a loyalist, he was driven out of Mexico. He settled in Upper California. Between 1834 and 1848, he lived at San Diego and Santa Barbara, and had a fine home at each place. During 1848 to 1850, he engaged in trade with William Heath Davis, and, in company with four other prominent men, attempted to found New San Diego. He was one of the voters in Old Town. In September, 1850, he served on the first grand jury in San Diego County under American rule. He married Francisca Estudillo, daughter of Prefect José Antonio Estudillo of San Diego, and after her death married her sister, María del Rosario Estudillo. He was a fine type of old Spanish merchant. In 1858, he donated his adobe house to the church and furnished the funds with which to remodel it into the Chapel

6. Smythe, op. cit., 178.

of the Immaculate Conception.

After Father Ubach had been in charge of the chapel several years, he saw that the rain was wearing down the adobe in the walls. He had the building covered on the outside with weather boards and thus it remains.

On July 16, 1869, the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Misión San Diego, Father Ubach laid the foundation of a new church at Old Town. When the rush of the new town began, work on the church was discontinued. The building was not completed until 1916. Father Joseph Mesney was then in charge of the parish.

For the first six years in which Father Ubach was in charge of the parish of the Immaculate Conception, all went well. On April 20, 1872, a disastrous fire swept a great portion of Old Town away. That event immediately turned the tide of civic growth towards New Town, a few miles south. Most of Father Ubach's congregation moved to New Town, and in 1875 he built a frame church building at the corner of Fourth and Beech streets. January 31, 1875, Father Ubach dedicated St. Joseph's church. Later, as a result of his labors, a fine brick structure was erected on the site. It was dedicated in 1894, and is the present

7. McGrew, op. cit., 244.

structure. It is regarded as a monument to the revered priest, Father Ubach, "The last of the padres."

About the time of the chapel's transfer to New Town, Don José A. Aguirre, donor of the Old Town Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, died. Father Ubach saw to it that Don José received an especially fine funeral. The generous old Spaniard was laid to rest within the small sacristy of the chapel. The grave is under a marble slab which bears a suitable inscription.

Although he moved to a finer church in New Town, Father Ubach did not abandon the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception. He held weekly services there for years, although his congregation consisted of Indians for the most part. It was to this chapel that Mr. A. E. Horton went one Sunday morning and put five silver dollars in the collection plate, among the pennies and nickels. This was in the early 1870's when Horton was promoting the construction of New Town. He seldom went to church, but this contribution to the collection caused Father Ubach to help him win the votes necessary to get the board of supervisors he wanted.

8. San Diego Chamber of Commerce Pamphlet, San Diego's historical landmarks, 5.

9. Mayne, op. cit., 333.

Helen Hunt Jackson in her famous novel "Ramona," written in 1884, gave fame to the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception. A scene of pathos and beauty at the close of Mrs. Jackson's story is the marriage of Ramona and Alessandro, at evening, in the chapel. Father Ubach, who was in charge of the church at that time, is supposed to be the "Father Gaspara" of the story.

For many years Father Ubach refused to discuss the matter, but as time went on and the story became a legend, believed by more and more thousands of people, he finally made a public statement. In the June 25, 1905, issue of the San Diego Union he admitted that he had married the couple and knew who they were. He would not tell their names because Mrs. Jackson had not revealed them in her book. At that time, two years before his death, Father Ubach was an old man; the incident was supposed to have happened more than forty years before. No doubt the story had become part of his life and by 1905 he had come to believe that it was true.

There is no doubt that during his long service at the chapel the priest married many an Indian and half-breed couple, any of whom might have been a Ramona and Alessandro. Mrs. Jackson's characters were fictitious and her story was written eighteen years after the marriage was supposed to have taken place. "Ramona" is just a beautiful romance,

but notwithstanding all the circumstances the belief exists that these two characters were married in the Estudillo house or in the chapel.

The chapel continued in use until Father Ubach's death, which occurred at St. Joseph's Hospital on the afternoon of Saturday, March 27, 1907. The beloved and venerable priest was mourned by all the city and surrounding countryside. His funeral, which took place at his church on Wednesday morning, April 2, 1907, was very impressive. Bishop Conaty of Los Angeles conducted the elaborate ceremonies and pronounced the eulogy. The church was filled to overflowing, with thousands of mourners remaining outside the building. There were masses of floral tributes, but none were more touching than the wild flowers brought from the mountains by his Indian parishioners. His body was carried to the Catholic cemetery, on the hill overlooking the scene of his labors, which he had established. There his grave was banked with beautiful flowers.

The Chapel of the Immaculate Conception was closed for a time, but was reopened after Father Mesney took charge of the parish. In 1916, Father Mesney opened and dedicated the new fine Church of the Immaculate Con-

10. Smythe, *op. cit.*, 173-176.

11. *Ibid.*, 176-177; 567.

ception at Old Town. The old chapel was put into use as a kindergarten and continued so until after 1922. Since then the building has been boarded up and some of the old mission relics are stored there.

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