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Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

SITE of MISIÓN VIEJA

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Chester Lyle Guthrie

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SITE OF MISIÓN VIEJA

Foolhardy indeed it would seem to push into a hostile wilderness, in the teeth of furious native opposition, with less than half a score poorly disciplined, ignorant soldiers as protection. Furthermore, with only an inadequate base of supply and that leagues to the rear and the home base weeks and even months away, with the country around about so filled with warlike tribes that messages were sent through breathlessly under strong guard and even the Indians dared not leave the territory held by their groups for fear of other tribes, the situation would give pause to any but the zealous or the mad. Yet the mission fathers went even a step farther in tempting fate by proposing not just to live peacefully among the heathen but to reform them and to a large degree to subjugate them as well. That the missions were as successful as they were speaks volumes for the coolness, bravery, and diplomacy of the padres. Also, since the savage was hungry during much of his life, the very fact that the missionaries assured him of enough to eat did more than all the armies of New Spain in speeding the conquest.

In founding San Gabriel and the other early mis-

sions of Upper California, the impetus came from the representative of the king himself. During August, 1770, news reached Mexico City that the expedition sent out by the Visitador general José de Gálvez under the leadership of Gaspar de Portolá had succeeded in reaching Monterey in Upper California. His Excellency the Viceroy, the Marqués Francisco de Croix, was overjoyed. He ordered a thanksgiving mass to be celebrated in the cathedral and the bells of the city to peal out the glad tidings.¹ It was soon decided to form ten missions to develop the new frontier. Five of the establishments were to be placed between San Diego and San Francisco. As a consequence, Gálvez summoned the reverend father guardian of the missionary college of the Franciscan order. The visitador informed the padre of the new decision and requested that the forty-four regular priests who had recently arrived from Spain be sent to the field. The reverend father guardian objected, stating that so many could not be spared from Mexico City, but finally agreed that thirty should be sent. The ten

1. Fr. F. Palóu, Historical memoirs of New California, I, 122-123.

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who were to go to Upper California were:

- The father preacher Fray Antonio Paterna, of the province of Andalucía.
- The father preacher Fray Antonio Cruzado, of the province of Los Angeles. Both came from the Sierra.
- The father preacher Fray Francisco Dumetz, of the province of Mayorca.
- The father preacher Fray Angel Somera, son of the College of San Fernando.
- The father preacher Fray Miguel Pieras, son of the province Mayorca.
- The father preacher Fray Buenaventura Sitjar, son of the same province.
- The father preacher Fray Domingo Juncosa, of the province of Cataluña.
- The father preacher Fray José Caballer, son of the same province.
- The father preacher Fray Luís Jaime, son of the province of Mayorca.
- The father preacher Fray Pedro Benito Cambón, of the province of Galicia.

These men were destined to make California history. By October they were on their way.

San Diego was sighted on March 12, 1771, and a short stop was made. Then the friars continued to Monterey, where they received the blessing of the father president Fr. Junípero Serra, and were given their assignments. The central government had ordered that five new missions, besides the three existing ones of San Carlos, San Diego, and San Buenaventura, be established under the protection

2. Palóu, New California, I, 124.

of the saints San Gabriel, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo Tolosa, San Antonio de Padua, and San Francisco de Asís. Vestments, sacred vessels, utensils of church and sacristy had been sent by the viceroy, as well as necessary supplies of food and clothing. Consequently, the indefatigable Serra lost no time in beginning the task. In fact, except in the case of San Gabriel, he attended all the founding ceremonies. To San Gabriel, Serra sent the two padres chosen, Fray Angel Somera and Fray Pedro Benito Cambón, by sea to San Diego because the overland journey would have been unnecessarily long and arduous. Consequently the mission expedition was begun while Serra was still in the north attending to the relocation of San Carlos on the banks of the Carmelo River.

Captain Pedro Fages, the military commander in California, in agreement with Padre Serra, allotted ten soldiers as guards for padres Somera and Cambón. Some delay was experienced at first because ten of the men at the presidio deserted and were persuaded to return only after much difficulty. However, a little over two weeks after Somera and Cambón had landed at San Diego, the expedition, on August 6, 1771, was able to start. They left not a bit too soon, for that very evening another

group of soldiers deserted. That would have caused additional delay if the padres had lingered, and time was precious, for shelters had to be built and crops planted before the winter rains came.

Padres Somera and Cambón pushed their way first forty leagues northward to the river of Jesús de Los Temblores, now called the Santa Ana River. Although this had been the site originally suggested by Serra as the location of the mission, the two friars found it little to their liking as an agricultural and missionary center. Furthermore, it was at that place that they first encountered Indian resistance. While the party was exploring the banks of the river, they were suddenly surrounded by a host of painted, yelling savages. The Indians were well armed and had two chiefs as leaders. The situation could hardly have been more precarious. Even if the small handful of Spaniards could have driven off the foe in spite of the numbers, there would have been a fear and resentment created among the natives which would have hampered greatly the success of the new endeavor. Beside that there was the eminent danger of being overwhelmed and killed or tortured. At that moment when a false move on the part of the tense soldiers would have precipitated a battle, one of the padres had a

brilliant flash of genius. He produced a canvas upon which had been painted a picture of Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows, and advanced with quiet dignity towards the howling savages.

The result was quite remarkable. Taken by surprise by the appearance of the painting, for such a thing perhaps had never been seen by them before, they were quite overcome. The dignity of bearing of the padre undoubtedly further impressed the Indians. In any case, the hostile demonstration turned into one of friendship and of interest in the painting. As the news spread, natives came from all the neighboring villages to view the wonder and leave some gift. Thus in dramatic manner a very difficult situation was cleverly turned to the ends of the missionaries.

After some time spent in inspecting the region around Santa Ana River, the expedition worked its way on to the valley of the San Miguel, now known as the San Gabriel. There was found a location which seemed to the padres much more suitable for their purposes. They decided to build on a small hill. Several streams of water with which the surrounding fertile plain could be irrigated ran through the valley. San Gabriel River itself was only about a mile distant. Along the water course

there were cottonwoods, willows, and other trees, thickets of blackberries, and a profusion of wild grape vines. Also, at a distance of little over two miles, was a large grove of oaks.³ Little more could be asked by the pioneers.

Padres Somera and Cambón immediately set about founding the new mission. On September 8, 1871, the cross was raised in the small shelter of branches which was hastily erected to serve as a church, and the first mass was celebrated. This marked the first act of the new mission and the formal dedication to Arcángel San Gabriel. After the ceremony, all was activity at the new location. A church, dwellings for the friars and the soldiers, and a stockade for protection had all to be built as soon as possible. In the new work the Indians aided with enthusiasm. They helped to drag timbers and poles from the streams and gathered large bundles of tules for the roofing. Indeed, the Indians treated the padres with the consideration and respect accorded to superior beings. Undoubtedly, when, in a few days, the padres stood watching the muleteers and

3. Palóu, New California, II, 322-324.

pack train as they disappeared from sight on their way to San Diego with the news of the new mission, they glowed with inner satisfaction at the propitious way in which events were progressing. Numerous converts, broad fields, and large flocks awaited only a little constructive effort and a short lapse of time.

Although matters seemed to progress with ease there was great fear, especially among the soldiers, of treachery. Nothing would be easier than for the seemingly peaceful Indians, who were swarming through the stockade, to take advantage of an unguarded moment and become, by a prearranged plan, a maddened, murdering, butchering human avalanche to overwhelm the small garrison and wipe out all traces of Misión San Gabriel. As a consequence, the natives were denied entrance to the stockade except in very small numbers, and, as an additional caution, Padre Angel Somera decided to go to San Diego in order to obtain reinforcements. He was able to get two more soldiers, and with these he returned on the ninth of October.

On the very next day the much-feared uprising came. It showed graphically the difficulties besetting the missionary experiment. Two soldiers, who were separated from the mission by some distance in pursuit of

the ordinary routine duties, were suddenly set upon by a number of furiously menacing Indians. The two men barely had time in which to protect themselves before the chief of the attackers shot his arrow at one of the soldiers, the one whom the Indians seemed most to resent. The soldier turned the missile with his shield, leveled his musket at his antagonist and shot. The Indian fell dead on the spot, while the rest fled in panic before men who were immune to native weapons and at the same time used their own to such deadly effect.

Upon hearing the shot, the corporal gathered his men and hastened to the rescue. The soldiers told the corporal what had occurred. The corporal ordered the dead chief's head to be cut off and raised on a stake in public view as a warning against any further outbursts. Then the soldiers rode through all the neighboring villages, showing the Indians that they had no fear of them and warning them not to repeat the offense.

A few days later the Indians returned to the mission. They made it known through signs that their intent was peaceful and that all they wished was that their dead chief's head should be returned to them. To that the corporal readily assented. The real truth be-

hind the attack came out some time later. It was learned that the soldier whom the Indians had attacked had earlier ravished one of the Indian women - said by some authorities to have been the wife of the chief himself! However, the incident was soon forgotten, and indeed, one of the first baptisms recorded at San Gabriel was that of the son of the very chief who had been killed.

Although good relations were re-established with the Indians, the cause of complaint against the soldiers remained. Guards were necessary for the protection of the missionaries, but at the same time they caused the good padres no end of difficulties. Life at the missions was monotonous, idle, and boring for the hot-blooded young men who made up the garrisons. They refused to labor around the missions, for that was below their dignity as soldiers, and consequently time hung very heavily indeed upon their hands. Very often they turned for diversion to the native women. The young soldier would saddle his steed, roll up his lariat and set out for the Indian villages. The first likely maiden, who had perhaps strayed too far from the family cooking fire, that the amorous rider encountered, would become fair prey. He would quickly spur his horse towards her and in his neo-caveman manner catch her with his lasso,

whereupon she would be powerless to repulse his advances. Such excursions constantly caused trouble, which added greatly to the missionaries' difficulties in maintaining peace and order.

After a year the rigors of the new establishment proved too much for Padres José Somera and Pedro Cambón. Fr. Cambón left first in April, 1772, after about seven months of enduring the hardships and disappointments of the first year. Padre Somera remained until October 23, 1772, when he too had to leave, although he had been able to stay at his post more than a year. Thus new padres carried on the work, especially Fr. Antonio Cruzado, who labored at the mission for thirty-two years - from August 15, 1772, to October 12, 1804. It was largely through the efforts of these men that the foundations for the future success of San Gabriel were laid.

In the report made in December, 1773, to the viceroy of New Spain, the condition of Misión San Gabriel was vividly described. As to location, it said:⁴

The mission of San Diego is followed by that of San Gabriel Arcángel, distant from it about forty-four leagues in a northwesterly direction. The road to it runs at first along the beach, and the rest of the way farther off.

4. Palóu, New California, III, 217.

at a distance of eight to ten leagues.

The mission is situated in the slope of a hill in the valley called San Miguel, about half a league from the source of the river by that name. It is in latitude thirty-four degrees and ten minutes, and it has in sight that plain, which is very spacious, with plenty of land and an abundance of water. It runs through the plain in channels formed by the river, and it would be easy to take the water from them to irrigate all the land they might wish for planting.

The report goes on to recount a little of the early history, and then it explains the situation as then existing. By the early part of October there had been sixty-three baptisms and two burials. Many converts were being prepared for baptism, some living at the mission and some in their village built of poles and tule, not far from the palisade. Continuing:

Inside the stockade are the church, made of logs with tule roof; the dwelling of the missionary fathers, offices and granaries, made of the same materials; the guard-house for the soldiers of the escort; and ten little houses for the Indians of California, of whom there are five families of married people and six of unmarried youths. With the work of these they are going to make a good planting of wheat, for which they had eight bushels of seed, and for which they were preparing the land. Then they were going to set to work to prepare more ground, in order to make, in season, a large planting of corn. This year they had the experience of gathering a hundred and thirty bushels from eight almuds, and from four almuds of beans they harvested seven bushels. Consequently they now have enough to make larger plantings with which to make new plantings and attract the heathens. This will be a great inducement, as the Indians

are very poor, on account of the scarcity of wild seeds and game. And they lack fish because they are about eight leagues from the beach. This distance is all level country populated with many villages which maintain among themselves constant wars, making it impossible for them to go to fish

The rest of the large plain was well populated with Indians. There were timber, an abundance of water, and good pasturage for cattle. The mission counted among its resources thirty-eight head of cattle, thirty of sheep, twelve of goats, twenty of swine, a filly, a stallion, five horses broken to the saddle, two saddle mules and fourteen pack mules equipped with the necessary for farm work. Tools were on hand, too, for carpentering and blacksmithing, except for a forge; however, there were no trained artisans for those occupations up to that time. The germ of the mission had been planted and it lacked only wise care and time to bring it into fruition.

By the next spring, conditions were but little better. This was brought out when the Anza expedition arrived on March 22, 1774. Although the four friars then resident at San Gabriel were overjoyed to see Señor Don Juan Bautista de Anza and his party safely arrived from the hazardous overland journey from Sonora, nevertheless they had little outside of prayers and entertaining con-

versation to offer their guests. The post was still partially dependent on San Diego. Rations consisted of maize tortillas and edible herbs from the fields. That was all that they could offer the Anza expedition. They did not even have a pack animal to spare.⁵ However, their hospitality was such that they slaughtered one of their few cattle to feed the famished travelers.

Conditions had somewhat improved by the winter of 1774. In the annual report of December, Fr. Serra wrote that there were sixty-five head of cattle, sixty-six sheep, thirty-four goats, eighteen pigs, nineteen horses, and sixteen mules. The livestock, excepting mules and pigs, had considerably increased. Harvest had also been gratifying; 144 bushels of wheat, 344 bushels of corn, and forty-eight bushels of beans had been gathered. Corn had done particularly well. Thus it was that the worst of the food shortage at the missions had ended.

Building had not gone forward so rapidly. Only a small smithy and a corn granary had been erected. The reason for this seeming lack of progress was that the

5. H. E. Bolton, Anza's California expeditions, II, 205-207.

padres were not satisfied with their location. The mission had proved to be too near the river, and consequently in danger of being inundated during the rainy season. Since permanent structures would be built of adobe brick, the threat of a flood was a very serious danger indeed, for the adobe bricks would dissolve, vitiating the laborious efforts of constructing the edifices. A much better site a few miles back from the river was found, which was higher and dryer but no less fertile, and preparations were begun for the change. By early in January, 1776, when Señor Juan Bautista Anza arrived on his second expedition, the mission had been moved to its present location. Temporary quarters had been raised, and plans had been laid for the development of the new place along permanent lines.

Old Misión Vieja had been abandoned. About the only real interest which was maintained in the former site was in the abundant growth of watercress. This inspired the one mention of Vieja in the diary, which Fr. Font kept during the second Anza expedition. Such a state of affairs was, perhaps, somewhat symbolical.

6. Quoted in C. A. Engelhardt, San Gabriel mission and the beginnings of Los Angeles, 32.

Misión Vieja, after all, was but an introduction in the unfolding of San Gabriel's rich existence.

It remained just a curious place in the territory controlled by the mission - a place to be pointed out negligently to the newcomer as the first settlement of the mission and as a good place to gather watercress. The wooden buildings soon fell to the ground or were carried away timber by timber for other uses. Nothing could have been more temporary and fleeting, yet it formed a fine introduction to the later history of the greater mission. Misión Vieja's importance was in no way diminished by its more humble role as half-remembered pioneer. To it remains untarnished the memory of the first years of struggle when padre, soldier, and convert pitted their wits and strength against the wilderness - and won.

Years later some adobe ruins were pointed out as the original San Gabriel foundations, but this, since only wood was used at Vieja, was easily proved false. The ruins were shown to belong to a ranch house erected in that spot shortly after the United States invasion. The location remained just a field used by Japanese to grow flowers for the Los Angeles market - fields which gave way slowly before the advance of the more prosaic

and rugged oil derricks. In order to keep the historic spot from being lost to the memory of man, a marker was placed there. On July 31, 1921, the Right Reverend John J. Cantwell, D. D., Bishop of Monterey and Los Angeles, blessed a tablet erected on that ground, on the corner of San Gabriel Boulevard and Lincoln Street, Pico, by Mr. Walter P. Temple, the owner of the land. This little ceremony gave Misión Vieja its first valid landmark since the disappearance of its old wooden buildings. There Misión Vieja remains, not the slightest material evidence of itself, but only the memory of an humble beginning of one of the foremost of the California missions.

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