

MISSION SANTA CLARA DE ASIS: COURAGE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

AN ESSAY PRESENTED TO THE
CALIFORNIA PIONEERS
OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

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Preface

The history of Mission Santa Clara is a long one which reflects courage and determination in the face of adversity. Since its inception, the history of this prosperous mission has been complicated by floods, fire, and earthquakes. Yet despite these convulsive events, Mission Santa Clara de Asis has thrived and is one of the most successful missions in Alta California.

From the First Idea to the First Cross

In September of 1776, Viceroy Bucareli of Mexico wrote a letter to Don Fernando Rivera, commanding officer at Mission San Diego, informing him that he had learned that two missions had been founded in the vicinity of the Bay of San Francisco. Since Bucareli had provided Rivera with military guards, he wrote that he would be pleased to have a report on the missions' progress.¹

Upon receiving the message from Bucareli, Rivera began his journey to the San Francisco area and after many days arrived at Monterey, where he was dismayed to learn that only one mission, the Mission San Francisco, had been founded. Accompanied by Father Tomas de la Pena, who along with another priest had been appointed to perform the religious duties of the expedition, Rivera continued north. On their journey they came upon a spot near the southern tip of the San Francisco Bay and were awed by its natural beauty and location near the Guadalupe River. They decided to return there in the near future to build the second mission that Viceroy Bucareli had heard was already completed.²

The mission was built to serve as a defense measure, to guard against British or Russian occupation of overseas Spanish land. Upon completion, the mission at Santa Clara would be the eighth mission in California, with the first being at San Diego.

On January 12, 1777, the foundation for Mission Santa Clara was laid.³ Priests planted a cross on this site and made an arbor to serve as a temporary church. All the plans for construction were finalized and they waited for the arrival of Father Jose Murguia from Monterey with the goods, cattle, and tools. In a few days following the erection of the cross, Father Murguia joined them with the necessary paraphernalia for their settlement, and on January 18, 1777, the formal ceremony of founding Santa Clara Mission took place.⁴ This was the first white settlement in the county. From this point the valley until then known as San Bernardino, became the valley of Santa Clara.

The church was justly called Father Murguia's church because he put his very heart into it. He worked with the local Indians to mold the adobe bricks, turn and dry them, and lay them with precision to build the most beautiful church he could imagine. He looked forward eagerly to its dedication, but on May 11, 1784, Father became ill and died.⁵ Father Junipero Serra, president of California Missions, who had come up from lower California to San Francisco to visit some of the missions and hold confirmation, had recently returned to the city after a visit to the Santa Clara Mission. So enfeebled was he by age that when the distressing news of Father Murguia reached him, he was unable to attend the funeral. He was able, however, to go to the mission for its dedicatory ceremonies that took place on May 16, 1784. Assembled to witness the imposing scene were many citizens, troops, and a

large number of unchristened Indians. On the following Sunday, Mass was celebrated and Father Serra also held his confirmation.

Origin of the Mission's Name

The spot selected for the Mission Santa Clara was chosen by Juan Bautista de Anza. The mission received its name from Father Francisco Palou in the memory of Saint Clare. Saint Clare was born in the year 1193, and at the age of nineteen heard Saint Francis speak. What Clare heard moved her deeply, and soon thereafter she entered the Convent of Portiuncula where she was later joined by her mother and sister. Clare established a "Second Order" which now bears her name; its members are called, "The Poor Clares". Saint Clare was a gifted missionary and most capable administrator. Yet while her life soon became a model of piety, obedience, and devotion to work, she is also remembered as an example of wit, charm, and beauty. Less than three years after her death in 1253, Clare was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church.⁶

The Various Sites of Mission Santa Clara

There is some debate over where the original mission (founded in 1777) was located, but none concerning its fate. At the time of the mission's original founding, the site was at the edge of the then principal camping and fishing grounds for the local tribes. The Indians called the area So-co-is-u-ka, meaning Laurelwood.

The first mission of upright sapling logs chinked with a clay and earth roof, provided a peaceful beginning to the mission and gave the Franciscans a chance to win the devotion of the local Indians. The site was named Santa Clara de Thamein, for the laurel trees about it. It was located about 1,300 feet from the Rio Guadalupe waters and the westernly bank of the surface Mission Creek. Here it remained for two years until it flooded in January 1779, forcing the padres to resettle temporarily in a second church while a third, more permanent church of thick adobe walls could be finished. When good weather returned, the third complete compound of church, buildings, and corrals was built on higher and drier ground nearly 2,700 feet further south again on Mission Creek's west bank. This mission was founded on November 9, 1781 by Father Murguia. Badly damaged by an earthquake in 1812 and 1818, the third mission was unsafe and suffered irreparable damage from a sharper jolt in 1822 that forced the padres once again to abandon the church and move to a fourth structure, temporarily, for a few years.⁷

A stronger fifth church was constructed in 1825, this one known as the Santa Clara Mission Church. It was dedicated August 11, 1822. This almost century old structure had withstood San Francisco's 1906 earthquake but was completely destroyed by fire on October 25, 1926. Many priceless relics and decorations were burned, including the historic altar, the old records, the altar rail and sanctuary, the old octagonal pulpit and the Indian wood carvings. The wood carvings on the altar - angels bearing flambeaux, and statues of saints, all the work of the Mission Indians, were lost. Also destroyed were two of the historic mission bells, the gift of the King of Spain in early mission days. Two of these bells were cast in Spain in 1798, the third in 1799; the bell that escaped damage in its sixty-foot fall from the belfry, bears the Latin inscription "Ave Maria Purissima, Santa Clara, 1798".⁸ Not everything was destroyed, many priceless historical altar ornaments were saved and those have been reinstated in the new \$150,000 steel and concrete reproduction of the Mission Church (the third church built), in the fourth church which was begun within a year after the fire, and steadily pushed to completion.

The sixth and present mission began on 1927. It was completed in time for a dedication on May 13, 1928, at which Archbishop Edward J. Hanna of San Francisco officiated. King Alphonse XIII of Spain presented the mission with a new bell on which translated reads "Alphonse XIII, King of Spain, generously donated to the University of Santa Clara of the Society of Jesus the bell in order that by the sound of the bell, honor might be paid daily to the Blessed Virgin".⁹ The bell was donated to

replace the one which was given by Charles IV. The King's Bell, as it is known, was meant to be rung each evening for the souls of the departed, a reminder, also, of the Franciscans that founded the church and the Jesuit fathers who followed them.

Relations with the Native Americans

At first the mission did not prosper, for the Indians were not attracted in any number. It took a great deal of time for some tribes to understand the new way of life offered at the mission even though after they came to the mission they were always provided with food, clothing, and shelter. In return for these, the Indians agreed to observe Spanish customs, take instruction in Christianity, and to work for the mission.

Christianity was the main subject taught in the mission school. Indian children attended classes in Catholicism at least twice daily. As a result of all the religious influences, more than 11,000 baptisms were performed.¹⁰ The missionaries at Santa Clara also taught both Indian children and adults how to read and write in Spanish. The missionaries or the skilled workers hired, taught the Indians such trades as blacksmithing, candle making, leather working, weaving, wine making, and woodworking.

Activities in the mission followed a regular schedule. The day began with the ringing of the church bells summoning everyone to church. The missionaries often combined these services with festivals and with ceremonies for births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths.

After the morning service, the Indians ate breakfast and went to work. They then had lunch at noon, enjoyed a two hour rest and then worked several more hours. After dinner the Indians sang, danced, or played. During planting or harvesting periods, the mission Indians worker several extra hours each day and had little time for recreation. This way of life was an enormous change from the less organized Indian way of life before the missionaries arrived.

According to mission records, the nearby Indians were friendly, but inclined to greed and thievery.¹¹ Their first mistake was to kill some of the mission soldiers's mules. A runner carried this news to the presidio in San Francisco which sent a detachment at once. On their way to the mission, the soldiers spotted the Indians in their village, feasting on the meat of the mules. On attempted capture, the Indians hid in the brush and shot volleys of arrows at the soldiers who then retaliated killing three Indians and capturing some of the leaders.¹² The soldiers took the ring leaders to the mission and flogged them, but despite the harsh punishment, the Indians soon resumed their theivery. Some soldiers assumed that to them it must have only been a fascinating game to see how much they could steal without being caught.¹³

Over the years, many Indians accepted and adjusted to the daily routine of mission life, while others disliked following a schedule and resented the loss of personal freedom. There were also many tribes that never became part of the

mission life. The missionaries often tried to keep dissatisfied Indians at Santa Clara Mission by offering them gifts or special privileges. Some missions even gave the Indians a two-week vacation every five weeks.¹⁴

Early Prosperity

"We entered a country I little expected to find in these regions. For almost twenty miles it could be compared to a park which had originally been planted with the true old English oak; the underwood, that had probably attained it's early growth, had the appearance of having been cleared away and had left the stately lords of the forest in complete possession of the soil, which was covered with luxuriant herbage and beautifully diversified with pleasing eminences and valleys, which with the lofty ranges of mountains that bounded the prospect required only to be adorned with neat habitations of an industrious people to produce a scene not inferior to the most studied effect of taste in the disposal of grounds."

"It (Mission Santa Clara) is situated in an extensive fertile plain, the soil of which, as also that of the surrounding country, is a rich black productive mold, superior to any I had seen in America"

-Captain George Van Couver
Nov.20, 1792¹⁵

The choice of the general area for the new mission was fortuitous and Mission Santa Clara prospered from the start. It attracted a large body of converts and became one of the four most populous missions in the chain.¹⁶ In 1790 Santa Clara Mission stood third in the number of converts and in 1800 it had the largest population (1,247) of any of the Franciscan missions.¹⁷

Just three years before the establishment of the Mission San Jose de Guadalupe, June 11, 1797, the eastern shores of San Francisco Bay were so little known that the missionaries at Santa Clara petitioned the commandante at San Francisco for permission to go into these lands in search of converts. They pointed

out in November 1794, that on account of a drought that year and consequent shortage of food, it would not take much to persuade the Indians to come to the mission. ¹⁵ Their request was refused, the commandante reasoning that the country was "almost unknown, the natives perverse, and the adventure too hazardous."¹⁹

The eventual site in Santa Clara Valley was a fertile spot, and despite a shakey start, the young mission had soon harvested an abundance of peaches, pears, figs and grapes. Harvests of grain were also fruitful and the mission raised a large stock of cattle. It is thought that the native Indians were perhaps drawn by the abundant crops. Because of these bountiful harvests, mission life was very successful for over fifty years.

Water was all important to the mission as it was needed to irrigate crops and to provide for the mission people and animals. Therefore priests designed and engineered magnificent irrigation systems at most of the missions.²⁰ All construction of these systems was done by the skilled mission Indians.

Unfortunately, with the eventual decline of the mission came the loss of the orchards and the livestock. Nevertheless the original olive trees and rose gardens still thrive.

The mission's success derived from a combination of favorable factors. The unequal climate and rich soil contributed to the abundant crops. The local Indians were friendly and many affiliated themselves with the mission. The real key to

Santa Clara's success, however, was the competence of the padres who directed the operation with resourcefulness and zeal.²¹

Relationship with Pueblo San Jose

Although the Santa Clara Mission prospered for many years, it was hampered by an uncomfortable relationship with the pueblo of San Jose that was founded the same year as Santa Clara Mission. The settlers' cattle mingled with those belonging to the Mission Indians and there were disputes over the rights to the water in the Guadalupe River.²² In time, the irritations were settled, but only after several years of friction.

Father Catala of the mission helped alleviate the situation by linking the two communities together with a four-mile road known as the Alameda. The Alameda consisted of a triple row of black willow trees which bordered the two-way road, and provided the worldly residents of Pueblo San Jose with a direct route to salvation at Mission Santa Clara.²³ In the mission's prime, the Alameda was often a kaleidoscope of color, with groups of people attired in satin and silks, riding their fine horses journeying to the mission church on Sundays. This long avenue eventually became San Jose's most popular promenade.

Design and Decoration of the Present Mission

What small bits remain of the old mission are now found near the center of the beautiful campus of Santa Clara University located in the city of San Jose. The present mission church is the sixth of Mission Santa Clara's churches. Some effort was made to design this newest church, built in 1928, in the manner of the 1822 church which it replaced. Across the street, in front of the present church, is the original tall cross of 1777. It's old wood is covered with redwood to protect what remains of it.

The facade of the church is concrete and stucco. The designs and pictures which were once painted on the 1822 facade have been recreated on the facade as false pillars and real niches filled with real statues. Over the entrance doors stands the figure of Saint Clare, patroness saint of the old mission. To the right of the doors is a Saint John the Baptist statue. To the left is Saint Francis of Assisi. These statues are carved from pearwood and came from Germany in 1931.²⁴ At the top of the facade is a triangle symbolizing the Holy Trinity.

The roof of the facade is tiled with 12,000 original tiles from the 1822 church.²⁵ These tiles had been removed from the church in 1862 when the old church roof began to sag, causing the roof to leak. These tiles, hand made by Indian artists, were stored in a warehouse when a new roof of wood shingles was put on the

church. Fortunately, their presence in a warehouse saved the tiles from being destroyed in the 1926 fire. These old tiles were replaced back on the roof when the church was rebuilt in 1928.²⁶ Here mission historian and scholar Father Arthur D. Spearman describes the tiles:

"Their patina bespeaks their age. Some, more yellow and softer, seem to.... date from 1790. Others, redder and harder, were fired in preparation for the fifth Franciscan church during the 1822-1825 building period."²⁷

Attached to the left of the facade is a low bell tower holding four bells, only one of which is original. It is dated 1798 and came from Spain. Two of the original bells melted in the terrible fire of 1826. New bells were recast from the original metal. The fourth bell was a gift from King Alphonse XIII of Spain in 1929.²⁸ The king sent the bell in honor of his ancestor, King Carlos IV, who sent the three original bells to Santa Clara Mission in the late 1700's.

Mission Gardens

Olive trees planted by the first padres still shade the remaining adobe walls of the original cloisters. Here in this garden survives more of the original flora than at that of any other mission.²⁹ The oldest grapevine in northern California and three "fan" palms date back to 1822.

Mission Santa Clara is particularly noted for its beautiful rose garden consisting of over 5,000 individual plants. Two roses--"Cabbage Rose" and "Castillian Rose"-- have been in the garden from the days of the old mission.³⁰ Father George Shaner, "Padre of the Roses", came to Mission Santa Clara in 1939 and brought with him his famous collection of roses. These were added to the already famous garden and placed in a special section.

The University of Santa Clara

Santa Clara Mission was one of the last missions to be subjected to secularization. The blow came in 1836 when the mission wanted to separate from the Franciscan order. As a result of secularization, the Indians were badly abused and their lands and cattle were quickly dispersed to the winds. After the American occupation, the lands were partly returned to the church which then turned them over to the Jesuit Order. The Jesuits were educators and intellectuals who used the mission for use as the seat of a college. Classes began in 1851 and the college was chartered by the state four years later. It is now the University of Santa Clara.

Earthquakes during Mission Santa Clara's fourth decade caused damage sufficient enough to require another building, which was dedicated in 1822, on a site where the university now stands. This university is the only one in the state affiliated with a mission, the result of a relationship that goes back to 1851 when the school was first established in the neglected remains of the church and its compound.³¹ Though a charter was issued in 1855, it was not until 1912 that Santa Clara attained the rank of university.³²

Santa Clara Mission Today

The present complex is a mix of new and restored buildings, including a few relics of the past. A concrete structure simulating the original adobe church was finished in 1928, and many artifacts of the earliest days are preserved within its walls.

Santa Clara Mission today has a small staff including priests and ten student workers. There are also several gardeners to keep up the lawns and gardens. Regular worship services are held at the Student Chapel on Sundays at 10:00 a.m., and then at 4:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and 10:00 p.m., daily during the school year. There is an average of 1,500 parishioners per weekend.³³ Funds to maintain the mission come from student tuition, the Jesuit community, and from 10:00 a.m. service contributions.³⁴

Water damage and termites are the two main problems facing the mission today.³⁵ After termites were discovered one or two years ago, it was decided to fumigate. What the mission directors discovered after their decision was that as a result of fumigating, 3,000 to 4,000 tiles were going to be damaged in the process.³⁶

Tour groups, many of them fourth grade classes learning about California's mission past, visit the mission each week. These groups consist of approximately

twenty to thirty people. Yearly the mission is visited by an estimated total of 3,000 people.³⁷

The mission facilities may be used for such functions as weddings and baptisms, but only for the students, the university faculty, and the mission staff. There is an average of 200 weddings and 100 baptisms per year.³⁸ Student worship services hold about fifteen concerts per year.³⁹ These concerts are all charitable and often feature the Chanticleer, a group of classical singing male students.

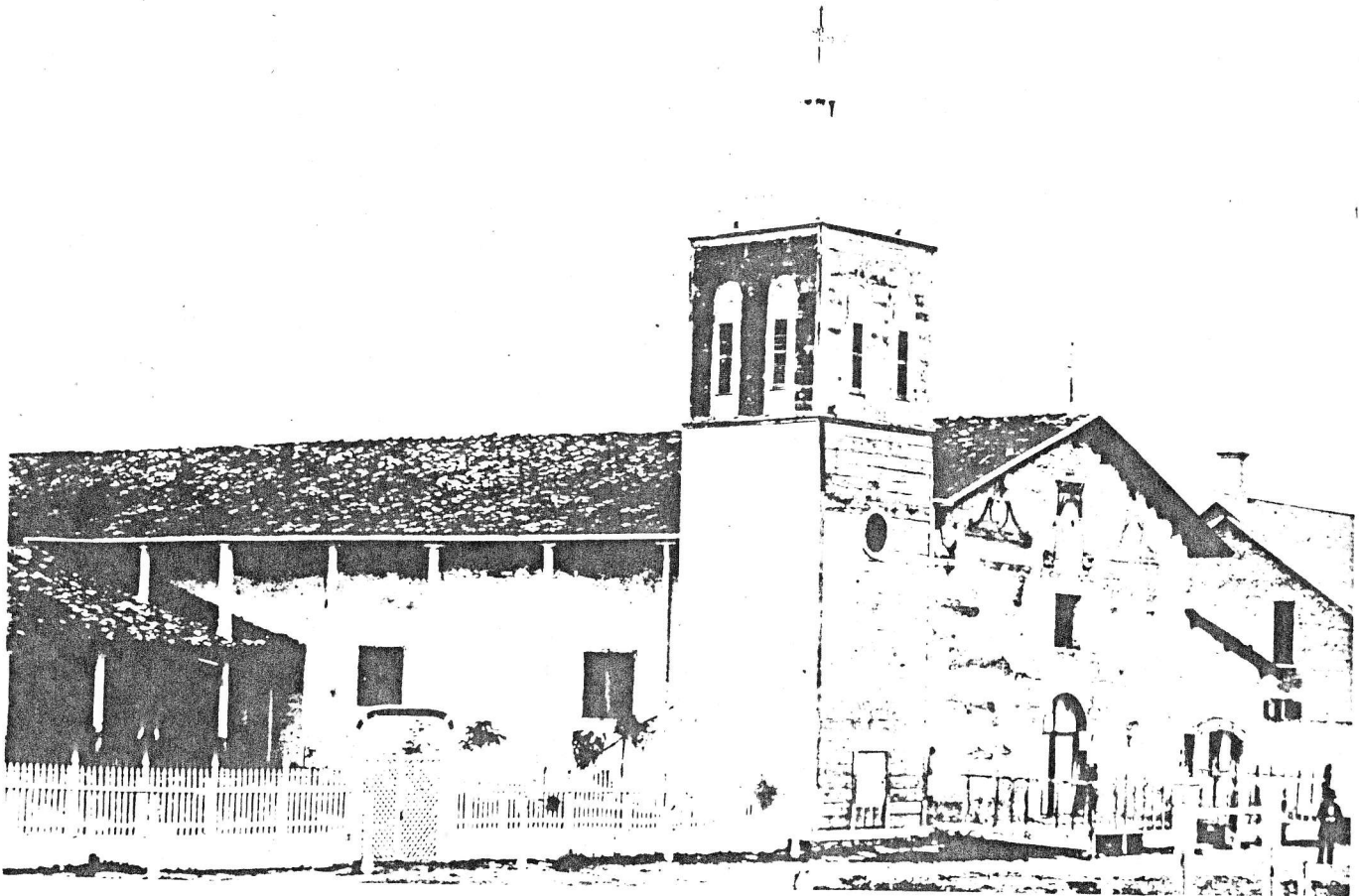
The De Saisset Museum of Santa Clara Mission is independent of the mission church and is located in front of the mission, to the right of the famous cross. A cemetery used to be immediately adjacent to the mission, but was long ago filled. There is now a Mission Santa Clara cemetery one-half mile away from the site of the mission.

Conclusion

Mission Santa Clara de Asis today is a reminder of Santa Clara's eloquent Spanish ancestry as well as California's founding years. With it's beauty, prestige, and determination, the mission has remained one of California's most successful missions. Beginning as a haven for local Indians, Santa Clara Mission has turned into a place of learning for tomorrow's future.

Appendices

This photo of Mission Santa Clara was made during the 1800s and reflects "Americanized" repairs. The University of Santa Clara was beginning to develop around the facility. (California Historical Society)





The California Mission Trail



Notes

1. California Missions-List of General Information (California Room Envelope #2), p. 2.
2. Ibid p. 1.
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Editorial Staff of Sunset Books, The California Missions (Menlo Park: Lane Book Company, 1964), p. 158.
6. Bruce Walter Barton, The Tree at the Center of the World (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson Publishers, Inc, 1980), p. 120.
7. California Missions-List of General Information , Op. Cit., p. 2.
8. Ibid.
9. Normile, Op. Cit., p. 2.
10. "Mission Life in America", World Book Encyclopedia , (1986 ed.), vol. 13, pp. 520-523.
11. Editorial Staff of Sunset Books, Op. Cit., p. 157.
12. Ibid., p. 158.
13. Ibid.
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15. William F. James and George H. Mc Murry, History of San Jose California (San Jose: SJUSD, 1933), p. 1.
16. Paul Johnson, The Golden Era of the Missions , (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1974), p. 195.

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18. California Missions-List of General Information, Op. Cit., p. 2.
19. Ibid.
20. World Book Encyclopedia , Op. Cit., pp. 520-523.
21. Johnson, Op. Cit., p. 54.
22. Editorial Staff of Sunset Books, Op. Cit., p. 159.
23. Ibid., pp. 161-162.
24. Mary Null Boule, Mission Santa Clara de Asis (Vashon: Merryant Publishing, 1988), p. 11.
25. Ibid., p. 12.
26. Ibid.
27. California Missions-List of General Information, Op. Cit., p. 2.
28. Ibid., p. 11.
29. Stanley Young, The Missions of Santa Clara (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1988), p. 108.
30. California Missions-List of General Information, Op. Cit., p. 2.
31. Young, Op. Cit., p. 105.
32. Ibid.
33. Charlie White, interviewed by Amanda Earl, Santa Clara Mission (San Jose, CA, 4:00 p.m., April 15, 1993).
34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

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Willow Glen High School

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