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A Dominican Heritage, Part II

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RELIGIOUS PILGRIMS IN THE NEW WORLD

On March 6, 1851, at 7 o'clock in the morning, the sound of the old Presidio cannon heralded the approaching ship. After a twelve hour voyage from San Francisco, the steamer anchored in Monterey Bay where many of the remaining inhabitants who had not been lured away by the cry of GOLD, hurried to the beach near the Old Custom House. Shouts of gladness rang out as the ship's tender drew near and the Californians, recognizing their new bishop, saw that he was accompanied by a priest and a sister. Most of the inhabitants of the coastal settlement were Catholics.



Photo by John E Boll 2013

San Carlos Royal Chapel and Cathedral, Monterey

Monterey, the former Capital of California, was a quiet little Spanish town in a hollow clearing with crooked streets and white-washed adobe houses. Red and purple flowered vines cascaded over the old adobe garden walls; lumbering oxen pulled creaking carts with wheels made of solid wood as chickens and dogs scurried out of the way.

The Dominicans walked up the sloping hill to their new home loaned to them by William E.P. Hartnell, who had served as an interpreter during the California Constitutional Convention in Monterey in 1849. The house was located on the present site of the Monterey Hospital.

“Monterey is one of the most delightful places that I have ever seen . . . The country is very beautiful . . . It would be like an earthly paradise were it not for the frequent fog,” Said Father Vilarrasa.

On March 13, 1851, the Hartnell house became the first convent in California for women with Sister Mary appointed Prioress of the new Santa Catalina Convent and henceforth known as Mother Mary Goemaere. That same month she opened her school with twelve boarders and sixty day scholars taught by herself, Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa.

Concepción Arguello arrived from Santa Barbara and entered the convent as Mother Mary’s first novice. On April 11, she received the Dominican habit from Father Vilarrasa and was given the name of Sister Mary Dominica. Her companion novice was Sister Rose. The next two sisters to arrive were Sister Frances Stafford and Sister Aloysia from Ohio, having previously promised Mother Mary they would join her.

Father Vilarrasa, on February 4, 1852, established Santo Domingo Monastery with a novitiate. Six young Catalans from Spain came to join him: Vincent Vinyes, Dominic Costa, Raymond Cervera, Louis Berenguer, Hyacinth Sola and Thomas Fossas.

In less than two years, after the arrival of the three pioneer Dominicans, Bishop Alemany, Father Vilarrasa and Mother Mary, they had established a convent for Sisters and one for Fathers and Brothers, making a total at that time in Monterey of thirteen religious in the order.

Mother Mary’s first house soon became too small for her growing school, so the Sisters moved their convent and school into a much larger new unfinished two story adobe building at Main and Franklin Streets which Don Manuel Jimeno had built for a hotel next to his house.

“The Dominican Nuns bought the best house in the city. The building was worth eighteen thousand dollars, but the owner, realizing the praiseworthy object for which it would be used, gave it for five thousand dollars payable in five years.” Said Father Vilarrasa. Following are the few lines from the quaint deed:

. . . the parcel of land lying and situated in said city of Monterey, commencing at the South End corner of the large, new, two story adobe house adjoining the dwelling of the parties of the first part in Main Street . . . the distance of one

hundred and forty-six feet . . . running all along the outside of the adjoining stone wall . . . to a spot within four feet of the present small back door which leads into the yard of the Vendor's dwelling house . . .

One hundred and fifty pupils were taught in the new school. Board and tuition in the regular branches was four hundred dollars a year and two dollars a month was charged for day scholars. The faculty consisted of the Bishop, Father Vilarrasa, Brother Vincent Vinyes, Mother Mary, and the Sisters who had entered the Santa Catalina community. Classes taught in the common school branches included French, Latin, music, religion, mathematics, and needlework. The Spanish language was used until all the sisters learned to speak English.

In the 1850's the land had not been cultivated and all commodities were extremely high priced; flour sold for eighty dollars a barrel. Most everything the Dominicans needed had to be imported.

The Fathers and Brothers had to depend almost entirely upon the kindness of the Catholics in Monterey who gave willingly when they could afford it. Mother Mary helped when she could. As the members of the little monastery suffered from lack of sufficient food, there was much sickness.

Every two weeks Father Vilarrasa walked the four miles to the old Mission church in Carmel where he said Mass before a well-attended congregation. On his way he often saw bear tracks on the road that had been cut deep by the heavy old wooden cart wheels.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Mission Carmel

Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa were familiar figures in the little city and were always greeted with the greatest of respect. "We go through the town wearing our habits, without astonishing anyone. The bells are rung at 3 a.m. and no one complains. We celebrate Mass according to the rite of our Order, and do all that a missionary can and ought to do. In our convent, by way of observance, we do not know the taste of meat, though we had good fish and eggs. Every day at 3 a.m. we have Matins; at six meditation, Prime and the Conventual Mass. At 11:30 a.m., we say the rosary, then Terce and Sext; if it is a feast day, None is added. At 2 p.m., we have Vespers; at 6:15 Compline, Salve, meditation, and spiritual reading. This is the life we lead from January first to the feast of Saint Sylvester. The intervening hours are devoted to the schools, studies, and so forth." Said Father Vilarrasa.

After the gold discovery, Monterey's population of men was greatly decreased when many left for the gold fields. It was apparent to Father Vilarrasa that few if any young men would be entering the Order if he stayed in Monterey permanently so he decided to move to Benicia since it was expected to become the metropolis of the Bay Area.

In 1853, the diocese of Monterey was divided and Bishop Alemany transferred to San Francisco as archbishop and he gave Father Vilarrasa permission to move Santo Domingo to the new city on Carquinez Strait.

Father uprooted his little community and set sail for Benicia. He was accompanied by Father Anthony Langlois, Brother Thomas O'Neill and the four brothers who had been professed the preceeding year. Father Langlois had been the first novice to join the Dominicans in Monterey and Brother Thomas the first English speaking young man to enter the Order in Monterey. With unselfish devotion the priests offered their time and talents to help the Sisters in the Monterey convent. They were sorely missed.

The Sisters labored long and weary hours sometimes enjoying activities with the children when time permitted; they and the boarding pupils had picnics in the nearby woods. The children loved to climb into the old wooden carts drawn by plodding oxen along the dusty roads.

After Bishop Alemany became Archbishop of San Francisco he invited Mother Mary to move her community and school to Benicia. When she accepted, Father Vilarrasa petitioned for the canonical transference which was signed by him and by Brother Vincent Vinyes in Benicia at Saint Dominic's on August 20, 1854. Mother Mary knew her school had already grown far beyond her expectations but she could not foresee what lay ahead; however, she was ready to follow a new path if she felt it was God's will. Busy days were spent packing and making arrangements for the journey.

For five hundred dollars she chartered the schooner EDA from Captain Edward S. Josselyn who agreed to sail with the first fair winds to the port of Benicia. The agreement was signed by the Captain in Monterey on August 2, 1854. On the day of departure, the Sisters were given a sad

and tearful farewell by the Catholics and many non-Catholic friends they had made during their short stay in Monterey.

Along with the Sisters, some of the resident pupils boarded the ship. With wind filled sails, the schooner weighed anchor and glided from the bay into the ocean. Mother Mary saw no more of her school which had been the pride of the little city.

When the ship passed Fort Point in San Francisco Bay, perhaps a certain Sister recalled the day almost fifty years before when she stood on the point and waved farewell to Nikolai Rezanov, her betrothed who sailed away, never to return.

It was the month of August when the little group arrived in Benicia, a small city at the foot of treeless, rolling hills covered with golden brown wild grass shimmering in the tireless breeze.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

California State Capitol in Benicia