

A cloud hovered over Mission Hill

Lydon, Sandy
First of two parts

THIS MONTH marks the 200th year of Europeans living in the place we call Santa Cruz. The story of the Franciscan mission which was founded in August, 1791 is a complex one, and I must admit that I have been reluctant to commit my thoughts about the mission to print, partly because I still have not yet made up my mind about the place. Was it a relatively benign place where 18th and 19th century European civilization was served up with the best intentions? Or was it a vile, horrible, place where the Indians found oppression and death?

Each interpretation has its proponents, and I suspect that, like everything else historical, the truth lies somewhere in between.

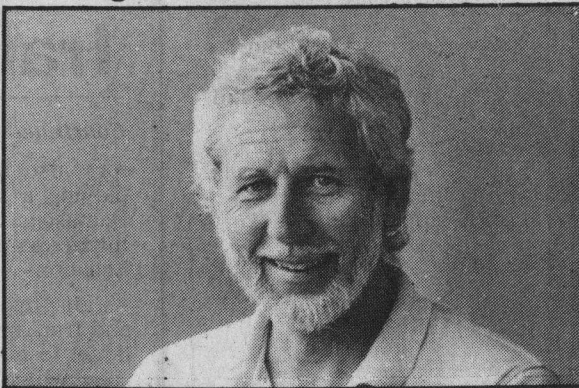
Also, I suspect that my Catholic upbringing has something to do with my hesitation — there will always be a nun standing over my shoulder ready to yank on my ear if I get out of line. I decided to walk, hovering nun in place, up to Mission Hill and sort through some of the history up there.

Santa Cruz skyline still looks strange and empty without the black exclamation point of Holy Cross's steeple. There is a hurricane dying off the coast of Mexico, and the wind coming up the riverbed is strangely warm and damp.

I walk into downtown on Mission Street, turn right on Bulkhead Street (named for the bulkhead built in the 1850s to divert the river toward the east bank), cross North Pacific Avenue and Hill bluff.

On Aug. 28, 1791, the head of the Alta California Franciscan missions, Father Fermin Lasuen (Serra's

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

successor) said Mass on the original mission site, probably at the base of the bluff near San Lorenzo Lumber. I have never been able to figure out why the Franciscans selected that site, because it is obvious even to the untrained eye that the San Lorenzo River had been carving away at the bottom of the bluff over the centuries.

According to Lasuen, "Many pagans, old and young, of both sexes, gave evidence that they would promptly enroll themselves under the sacred stan-

dard." Lasuen returned to the Carmel headquarters, and very soon thereafter, the first pair of Franciscan missionaries, fathers Lopez and Salazar, arrived at Santa Cruz.

THE WINTER Of 1791-92 was a humdinger. The Carmel River tore away much of Lasuen's harvested crops and over at Soledad the two missionaries there were terrorized by the Arroyo Seco River. At Santa Cruz, the San Lorenzo rose up and ate most of the rude shelters at the base of the hill. The two padres begged that the mission be moved up to the top of the mill and out of harm's way. They also begged to be transferred. They got their first wish, but not their second.

The pathway at the top of the stairs is rimmed by sandbags, evidence that a lot of water still flows off the hill during heavy rains. A large stream used to run across Mission Hill and followed the general route of School Street ending in a waterfall at the edge of the bluff.

Following the mission's move to the top of the hill in February, 1793, the creek proved to be as much of a problem as the river had been down below. In fact, if you think about it, the classic Franciscan mission in California evolved out of a semi-arid tradition. Neither the mission buildings nor the missionaries were suited for heavy rain.

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Mission Hill

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STANDING ATOP Mission Hill and looking at Santa Cruz and the sparkling sea beyond, it is difficult to understand, but most of the missionaries assigned here found the place to be dismal and depressing.

Fathers Lopez and Salazar did not get along with each other or the place. Constantly bickering and arguing, the two sent a stream of letters to Lasuen asking to be transferred. Somewhere. Anywhere but Santa Cruz. Indians were not enrolling as quickly as hoped. Winter rains knocked down the buildings. Ornery Indians living out along the north coast periodically raided the compound, setting fire to the roofs. Grizzly bears rumbled through to get to the dead whales which periodically washed up on the beach.

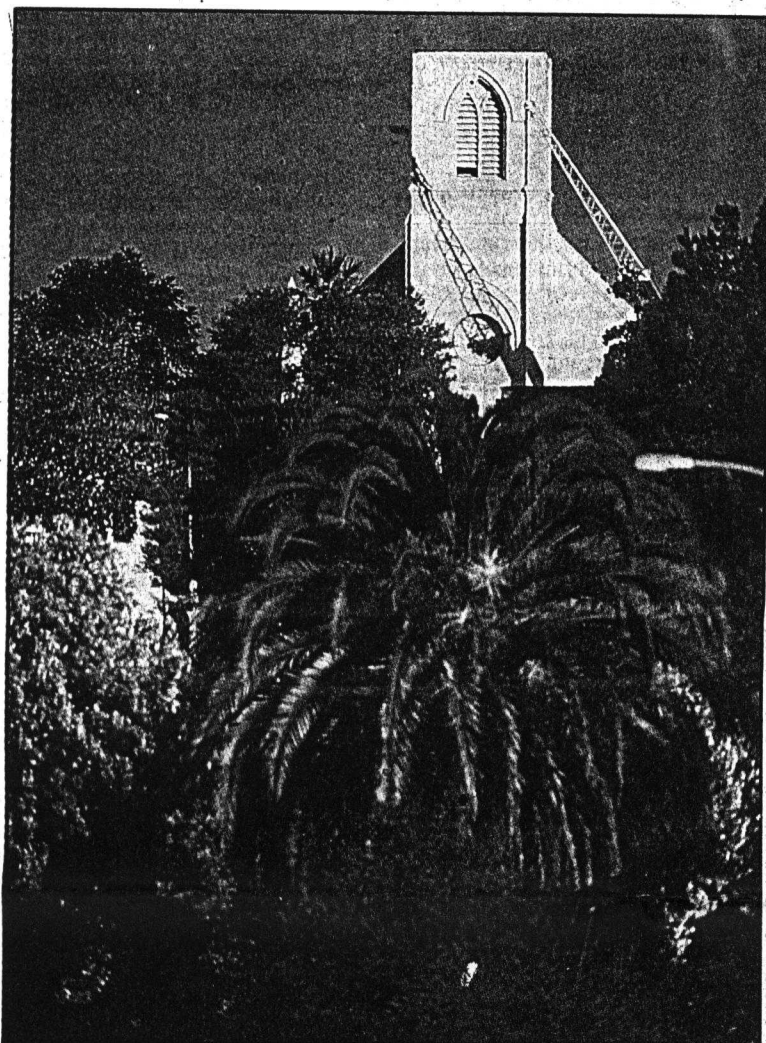
Each of the California missions had a different personality. The missions were like ships, and the padres were their captains. Some places, such as San Juan Bautista, were blessed by the presence of tolerant, understanding padres who attempted to preserve and even nurture some of the Indian culture they found there.

Santa Cruz's padres were a series of grumps, misfits and odd balls, which leads me to the basic conundrum: Did the personalities of the Franciscans stationed at Santa Cruz cause the place to fail? Or was the place so unpleasant that it twisted their personalities? Did Santa Cruz make them crazy? Or were they already crazy? (This Zen koan persists — is there a natural eccentricity here which works its way on the inhabitants, or does the place attract eccentrics?) Whatever the cause, there is definitely a dark, brooding theme of melancholy and tragedy running through the history of this hill.

The only surviving mission building is on my left as I walk up School Street. The adobe's refurbished porch and overhang do much to restore the feel of the place when the Indians built it and lived in it.

THE STORY OF the acquisition and restoration of this building is indicative of Santa Cruz's ambivalence about its Hispanic past. Had it not been for the Adobe Coalition and the dedicated fanaticism of local historian Edna Kimbro, this building would now be some kind of Victorian tea house rather than a monument to the local Indians.

In 1797, there was so little to show for the six years of work that Lasuen declared Santa Cruz as having "nothing but the foundation laid." Later that year, as evidence that the Spanish government agreed, the civilian settlement of Villa de Branciforte



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Steeple of Holy Cross Church no longer punctuates the sky over Mission Hill.

was founded directly across the river, in violation of Spanish laws about having civilian settlement and missions close together. Neither Santa Cruz nor Branciforte ever amounted to much.

THE LOFTY Hopes for Mission Santa Cruz are embedded in its full name, *La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz*, the exultation of the Holy Cross. There was little exultation here, and even today, the site is a disappointment to visitors. Instead of a full-blown mission church, like the one at San Juan or Carmel, I am greeted by the two-thirds size replica built in the early 1930s. The front of the original mission church collapsed on the night of Feb. 16, 1857, and no images of the original survived. (Historians have blamed the collapse on an earthquake, but there was no local earthquake recorded on or before Feb. 16. The building may have been damaged in the huge Fort Tejon earthquake on Jan. 9, but it seems that the building collapsed, unbidden, in the night.)

interesting artifacts including a beautiful painting of Santa Cruz and one of Justiano Roxas, one of the last local Indians.

St. Andrew and his fault were very rough on Holy Cross Church in October, 1989. The forlorn church sits, its hat off, amid a welter of rent-a-fence, porta-potty, and church-in-a-tent. Huge chunks of paint fell away from the building's abutments and the original red brick shows through like flesh through skin.

Built in 1889, this church building survived longer than any other church building on this hill, but almost exactly 100 years after it was built, the bad luck (dare I say karma?) which swirls around this spot, rose up and knocked its top off.

Beneath my feet, under the pavement of this parking lot, are buried some of the Indians who came here to be introduced to the blessings of European civilization — "enrolled under the sacred standard." As I stand here, I wonder about the notions of "progress" and "success" which the mission at Santa Cruz failed to meet. Indians beneath my feet. Disaster all around. The message I am getting is that we need to reexamine our notions about progress and success.

The warm, tropical breeze which, like the Franciscans, came all the way from Mexico, stirs the dried plants in the churchyard. Drought. Earthquake. Flood. Maybe we're no match for this mountain.

NEXT: The tragedy of Father Andres Quintana.

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