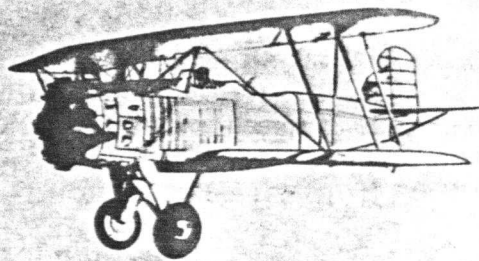


The Mission:

Santa Cruz Beginnings



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Mission Santa Cruz began auspiciously enough. It seemed to have everything in its favor—good soil and a choice climate, a commanding site, and a population of rather complacent Indians amenable to conversion. But many difficulties were to follow before the settlement finally “took.”

The history of the City of Santa Cruz officially began with the establishment of that mission nearly 200 years ago. The surrounding area was first explored by Europeans in 1769, when a group of Spaniards known as the Portola Party christened it Santa Cruz, or Holy Cross. But it wasn't until 22 years later that the mission, officially called *La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz*, was actually founded and construction began to provide housing for the padres.

Twelfth in a chain of missions established by Father Junipero Serra, it was dedicated in May 1794 when Father Fermin de Lasuen, Corporal Luis Peralta and a group of soldiers planted a cross on a small hill near the mouth of the San Lorenzo River.

Later, construction began on what we now call Mission Hill, which was safer from flooding. Laid out in a quadrangle, the mission complex included workshops and a two-story granary as well as the church itself, which was made of timber, adobe and limestone.

The idea behind the establishment of the California missions was that once a mission was constructed, the priests would convert the natives and teach them to farm and to care for the mission herds. Eventually, the Indians were supposed to take over the care and operation of the missions themselves.

But local Ohlone Indians were a motley group of hunters and gatherers, making their homes in crude huts and wearing clothes of poorly tanned leather—if they wore clothes at all.

And unfortunately, the myth of the kindly padre taking care of his childlike Indian flock has been replaced by a more realistic view of what actually went on in the early mission days. The converts worked long hours each day and were fed and housed poorly, with girls and women being locked up in crowded quarters “for morality's sake.” Punishment by flogging was common. Understandably, the death rate was high, and the birth rate was low.

Due to its large agricultural holdings and fine herds of sheep and cattle, the Santa Cruz mission at first became prosperous. Nevertheless, its history was to be ill-fated. A chain of misfortunes hit, beginning with a series of devastating winter storms, which melted the adobe buildings, rendering them practically uninhabitable.

Then the nearby Villa de Branciforte, founded by the Spanish government as a retirement and penal colony, became populated with vagabonds and criminals, condemned to live out their days in exile. Arriving sick, destitute and disillusioned, these undesirables and their families were to encroach on mission land, to usurp mission pasture, and to establish a settlement where drinking, gambling and immorality were the order of the day.

Eventually, the enticements of this life affected the Indian population of the mission. In fact, the influence of the rowdy Brancifortians may actually have been a factor in the death of a mission padre. In 1812, Father Quintara was found murdered in his bed, presumably by a band of disillusioned neophytes

the Villa grew—an attractive place for smugglers and criminals.

Mission Santa Cruz, with its inglorious history, was one of the first missions to be secularized in 1834, when the stock was sold and the land deeded to private individuals. The Indians quietly abandoned it, leaving the buildings to crumble and collapse. Finally the church tower fell in 1840 and the church itself was destroyed by an earthquake in 1857. A tidal wave washed away nearly everything else.

Later, a wood-frame church was built in 1858 to replace the old adobe. It remained in place until 1889, when the present Holy Cross Catholic Church was erected.

Today the School Street Adobe, a two-story portion of the original dormitory used to house the Indian population, is the only remaining structure from the mission period. Efforts are now underway to establish a Santa Cruz Mission State Historical Park and to restore this original adobe structure to its former appearance.

A local group, the Adobe Coalition, is working to obtain funds from the State Parks Department to complete the needed work. Largely



Mission Hill with Santa Cruz Mission Adobe at upper right and Old Mission Church at left, circa 1865.

PHOTO: COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

who felt he was excessively cruel.

Misfortune struck again in 1818 when rumors of an impending attack by pirates caused the mission padres to gather their converts and flee to the hills, leaving the task of packing up their valuables to the nearby residents of the Villa. The Brancifortians were only too happy to comply and eagerly helped themselves to tools and supplies, quickly depleting the mission's supply of food and spirits before looting the church itself.

Angry and demoralized, the padres put in a request to abandon the mission. The request was denied.

Things grew worse as crops failed and animals fell sick. At best, the population at the mission had reached only 523, which was the lowest of all the California missions. And it was slowly declining while

due to the efforts of the Coalition, the state has recently submitted a preliminary plan calling for the restoration of the Adobe. An adjoining acre of land may be acquired for a park with picnic facilities and parking. If all goes as planned, this park and the mission building would be open to the public daily with activities and programs.

The present mission, which stands between the church and the adobe, was built in 1931 and is actually a one-third size replica of the original building. Inside, a small museum houses relics from the mission days. Both the mission and the museum are open to the public every day, giving visitors an interesting glimpse of life in the early days of Mission Santa Cruz.