

TWO Survivors Of the Great Days of Mission Dolores

Raymundo Miramontes, Altar Boy, and Pablo Vasquez, Son of the Majordomo, Tell of Life and Conditions at the Historic Place Before Secularization Closed Its Work and Its Doors in 1842

By Ashleigh B. Simpson

SPHINXLIKE in the heart of San Francisco stands the Mission Dolores, seeming to hold behind its closed doors the secrets of the romantic history of California. Its 133 years of existence take it back to revolutionary times and invest it with fascinating interest. We who hold the mission in reverence have grown to regard it as belonging absolutely to the past. It does not occur to us to seek for men who actually participated in the mission work in the days when the Franciscan friars still administered to the spiritual and temporal needs of the Indians and the Spanish.

There are, nevertheless, two such men living today at the little town of Halfmoon Bay. One, Raymundo Miramontes, who served as altar boy in those days, following his father around the Mission Dolores and accompanying him in the trips about the peninsula where the duties of the majordomo called Miramontes, then a slight stripling of a lad, came daily to the mission from his home near the "little spring" in the neighborhood of the Presidio. Today they are comfortably circumstanced Spanish aristocrats living at ease at Halfmoon Bay, where they receive due homage and respect from the people of the little Spanish town. Were you to inquire for Vasquez, as I had occasion to do, you would be explicitly informed and go on your way with the impression that "the Pablo Vasquez" was the most important personage in the vicinity. He is invariably spoken of in this quaint way throughout the countryside surrounding his rancheria. It is a mark of distinction that is justly paid. In spite of their gray hair and falling sight, the two old comrades smilingly steal back into the past and bring from it the most alluring pictures of those faraway days, recalling the faces of the gentle padres and telling the story of the early mission settlement.

As far as they know, Don Pablo Vasquez and Raymundo Miramontes are the only remaining souls who trod the ground of our Mission Dolores when the long silenced bells described by Bret Harte sounded the knell of sacred service. They alone are able to tell of the day when Fathers Muro and Real chanted the "missa" before the elaborate Mexican altar in the Mission Dolores and describe the people who sat upon the rough hewn benches, and whose names remain to us interwoven with the early history of San Francisco. In the time of their youth San Francisco was a phantom, a dream of the future that never disturbed the peaceful slumbers of the fathers nor crossed the mind's vision of the two comrades. To the west of Mission Dolores, now majestic in the heart of a vast civilization, lay naught but barren rolling hills and the ocean; to the south the Indians tilled the soil and herded cattle under the supervision of Pablo Vasquez' father, the majordomo. Sand dunes lay between the Mission and the Presidio toward the north, and to the east the waters of San Francisco bay lapped gently in tides that washed over the heads of many of our tallest buildings and greatest thoroughfares. That was the city then, the metropolis known to the original Don Gaspar de Portola.

The hills, now hidden by the homes of thousands, and the streets rumbling with the traffic of a dense population, were open country when Pablo Vasquez played about the walls of Dolores, and Raymundo Miramontes served the thrice blessed wine. Who was there then, gazing across the heat quivering wastes surrounding the mission settlement, who would one day stand on Market street and witness the passing of a pageant escorting a fictitious Portia, while hundreds of thousands cheered and made merry? Who indeed but the Don Pablo Vasquez, stanch and loyal, though at the age when the hand shakes, the eyes grow dim and memory fails. San Francisco, built anew, has begun a second era, but the Pablo Vasquez remains to decipher the "weird palimpsest old and vast." Miramontes is yet alive and able to awaken the priceless memories which every Californian should cherish and pass on. Listening to Pablo Vasquez and Raymundo Miramontes, there is conjured up from the past a picture of the crude adobe buildings and the dried mud dwellings, the work of the Indian converts, which ranged themselves before the mission forming a square or plaza. Dolores street of today was then about a block in length and to the rear of the mission Guerrero street scarcely boasted of as much. That was the extent of San Francisco, the future sovereign of the Pacific coast, before the first creeping cluster of houses appeared on the sand dunes as an omen of the huddled thousands which were to conquer the seven hills, when the progress of a great nation had stamped out the work of the Spanish fathers and razed the mud houses to dust, leaving naught but the mission for the generations to come. Vasquez and Miramontes can tell you of the struggles of the fathers with the Indians and of the last days of Dolores, under the Spanish rule, for they were a part of the generation that passed from the mission then and of the generation that lies dead and unknown to us now. Would that you might have heard the voice of the Pablo Vasquez as he told the story in the little hotel at Halfmoon Bay. Would that the guttural Spanish of

Raymundo Miramontes might have come to your ears as it did to mine, and that you might have seen the light that crossed the faces of the two life-long comrades as they dwelt in memory upon the familiar scenes which played such an important part in the history of early California. When Vasquez described the place of his birth I felt the awe of one witnessing the revival of the long dead, for he spoke of weird places, and reared from the dust the crumbled mansions of old. There on the side of the little square embracing Dolores, Vasquez pointed out the home of the padres next to the mission, and directly adjoining the place of his birth, the house that sheltered his father, majordomo of the settlement. On the opposite side of the rectangle there was a long low room, where, like the child of the village blacksmith, Vasquez looked in at the open door, but saw instead of the flying sparks the mysterious weaving of the old Indians carding the wool and purr and rattle of the ancient machinery brought from Mexico long before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth rock, and watched the withered hands of the old Indians carding the wool and warp of many strips which now hang as relics, curiosities, in the guarded cases of our museums. With uncanny grace the Pablo Vasquez led me on through the phantom scene and brought to my notice a long ditch running with water. The crude aqueduct found its source near Precita (little dam) and flowed for the main part down Dolores street, turning into what is now Sixteenth, meandering easterly toward the bay. This was the mission water supply, constructed under the supervision of the fathers by the converts. Could you have lived in that time you would have witnessed sights that would raise every blind in the crowded houses that now line those streets; for there, under the noonday sun, the women of the settlement bathed freely along the banks of the strange waterway, and if you gazed a bit closer you might have discerned the bronzed little form of the son of the majordomo splashing and shrieking in the ecstasy of his brook bath. Vasquez told me of the homes of the



aristocrats of the day—the Valencias, the Guerrerros and the Bernalis. He spoke of the little adobe shack which stood at the corner of Sixteenth and Dolores streets until recently devastated. A great pride filled him as he mentioned the resident of the old mansion, for it was the home of the Bernal family and Cosse Cornelius Bernal was his godfather. One saw the rambling adobe in a different light. Was it not the ancestral, the royal abode of one whose name we frequently connect with the rise in the southeastern part of our city—Bernal heights? The little primitive home of the Bernalis was vacated in the time of

Vasquez, the family having moved to Precita, where the mission water supply had its source. There is a phase of the early life of Dolores that comes to the Pablo Vasquez in the mists that shroud the first part of his boyhood—the struggles of the Spanish fathers with the Indians. In that time, when the cultivated valleys of the Coast range and the tilled soils of the San Joaquin were wild and crossed only by the trails of animals, when the gold that lured thousands to the west was hidden in the earth, the Franciscans crept forth and scoured the country for Indians. Many and many a good father rode out on his sturdy horse with a laugh and a wave of the hand, to return in a few days bound with leather thongs to the back of his pony and pierced through and through with arrows. The danger of attack was for the most part confined to the districts of central California. The coast natives captured in the neighborhood of Tamalpais and San Rafael were mild and offered little or no resistance to the padres, making in the end the most satisfactory converts in point of learning and usefulness. The more unruly when taken young proved as tractable and as efficient in the end. Strong and determined in their purpose, the fathers were not to be deterred by the onslaught of the savages. One name remains to us in history to tell of an instance when the fathers made the mistake of capturing a savage who was in years beyond the age for peaceful subjection. The Pablo Vasquez shook his head when he mentioned the great Pomponio, and, indicating with his thumb the location of a valley in the hills back of Halfmoon, he remarked in his gentle English: "Ah, Pomponio, my father knew him; they say he killed many, and there is a canyon yonder that bears his name." Pomponio was the cause of many wild nights in the settlement, for every so often he broke from the watchful fathers and returned to his bloodthirsty comrades, mustering them into marauding bands that would swoop down in the dark upon the cluster of adobes that sought shelter in the shadow of Dolores, where, amid havoc and massacre, they would ransack the dwellings and flee to the safety of their lairs in the hills. More often they would creep stealthily into the settlement in the early hours of the morning and make away with the corralled horses while the padres slept. This practice became so prevalent that the wily fathers conceived the idea of tying a bell to the neck of the mare in each corral that they might be alarmed when the thievery was in progress. This custom was generally adopted in later years and even today the Spaniards of the peninsula refer to the "bell mare." Even

after this precaution the padres were frequently crestfallen to awaken and discover their corrals empty. The Indians, quick to adapt themselves to new conditions, employed every caution in approaching the inclosures. One of their number would quietly capture the "bell mare," deftly remove the bell and tinkle it occasionally to reassure the padres, while the remainder of the party filed out of the rear of the corral with the horses. It seems uncanny, weird as a breath from the unknown, to think there is a man yet living who can tell such tales, for to you and me, who have not seen there is little save the clean, white-washed facade of Dolores, the slanting and fallen stones in the graveyard near by, to tell of the times when the new America lay in the east and the law of the west, of San Francisco, was the law of the Franciscan fathers—of Spain. A clean street and modern houses can bring no picture, can call up no vision of the past to us. Shut your eyes to the common sight, your ears to the rattle and murmur of a great city and listen to the Pablo Vasquez and Raymundo Miramontes while they tell you of the bull fights that once stirred the dust before Dolores until all there was of San Francisco lay hidden in the cloud, and the meager populace choked and coughed as it cheered the brave matadors in the fierce encounter. Bull fights there were before Mission Dolores and many of them held on the great saints' days. Vasquez tells of them and of how they were held on St. Francis day, and Miramontes, who is older, will corroborate him. Vasquez gazed at these strange spectacles in the glee of childhood's enthusiasm, clutching the white hand of Father San Te Jan, the Indian padre with whom he had the most familiar association. Before a great while Vasquez and Miramontes will pass and their tales will be forgotten, but there will remain to us several relics which the Pablo Vasquez has had in his possession since the old days and which have been in his family for generations. They are antiquities which rank second only to the human interest of the things of which Vasquez and his comrade have so much to tell. The museum of the Leland Stanford Junior university has been fortunate enough to secure them through the efforts of George C. Williams of Palo Alto. Mr. Williams is a strong friend of the Pablo Vasquez and after much persuading has succeeded in obtaining the articles for the museum, where they may mean as much to us, perhaps, as they have to their original owner. A faraway look came into the eyes of the Pablo Vasquez as he showed me the old mission grindstone, which he

has in his barn at Halfmoon. He fingered it lovingly, though he attributed the reason for retaining it to its usefulness. Somehow I felt small and insignificant beside that disk of stone in its modern setting, even though the diameter was scarce two feet. More than 100 years ago that stone was quarried from the mountains of Spain and rounded by the crudest methods. The keen edges of the tools that aided in the erection of Dolores itself were ground upon its surface, and many times has the stone been rounded because of the methods used by those who did not have the necessary aid in turning it. Anxious to secure some hold on the old implement, the Stanford museum has taken the original crank into its care. At first one sees little in the rough piece of wrought iron, but a voice murmurs, "Gently, brother; gently pray," when it becomes known that the mission blacksmith, Abodio, toiled arduously in its making. When one of the first of the Vasquez family stepped into the scheme of things relating to the Mission Dolores, it brought with him from the mother country a hand wrought brass candlestick, and eventually it passed into the possession of Fathers Muro and Real, driving nightly the shadows from the somber recesses of their study. Long long ago, when the base of the host glass was generous to Miramontes, it was the days of his sacred duties, the same light that carved the genial features of the Padres Muro and Real from the darkness shone on his face and was reflected in his eyes. The eyes have dimmed since then, as has the memory, but the candlestick still remains. It has seen service not only in the fathers' study, but returning to the Vasquez family has for many seasons lighted the apartment of Don Pablo at Halfmoon. There is no candle in the spacious socket now, the grease about the base has been cleaned away, the day perhaps one should say the night—the candle is done, and at the conclusion of service rendered to historic generations the final resting place will be behind the glass of an exhibit case. Monopoli we know it was probably unknown to the Franciscans. It is a small way, however, there was monopoly in their time and they were the capitalists in so much as they controlled every interest, every industry and exacted a toll from every possible source. Far down in the Santa Clara valley where all the farming of the mission was done, the natives gathered their products and with difficulty trucked them to San Francisco, where, before the doors of Dolores, they received official weight from the mission scales in exchange for an "arroba" or 24 pounds of tallow, hides or wool. There was no other medium of exchange money receiving consideration only as a curiosity. 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