

Historical Ramblings

The Day Nature Claimed La Purisima

In 1812, Mission La Purisima was typical of the nineteen Spanish missions that were spread throughout California. These missions were working ranches, with La Purisima boasting 4,000 cattle, 12,000 sheep, 1,150 horses and crops of wheat, corn, and beans. The Mission also maintained vineyards in the Jalama valley, from which the Padres made wine. Two Padres, about 1,000 Chumash and a handful of soldiers resided at Mission La Purisima. Mission property extended “as far as the eye could see” and beyond.

On the morning of December 21, around 10 a.m., the quiet of La Purisima was upset when the earth began to shake. The strong earthquake frightened the mission's residents, who rushed out of the mission buildings. Luckily, they were too scared to re-enter the buildings, because the first shock turned out to be only a foreshock.

About fifteen minutes later, a stronger earthquake struck, the equivalent of a 7.0 on today's Richter Scale. The shaking was so intense that the mission's church bells rang out, the adobe walls of the mission buildings were shattered, thrown out of plumb, and in some instances collapsed, reducing Mission La Purisima to rubble. The missionaries reported that a large crack opened in the hill behind the mission. Three days later the mission site was inundated by mud rushing from that crack (known to generations of Lompocans as “The Crevice.”). Severe damage from the earthquake was also reported from Mission Santa Ines, Mission Santa Barbara, the Santa Barbara Presidio, Mission San Buenaventura (Ventura), and Mission San Fernando, covering a distance of over 100 miles. Hundreds of aftershocks occurred until April, 1813, with some regularly occurring 15 minutes apart.

On December 31, 1812, Fathers Payéras and Ripoll reported: “The extraordinary and horrible earthquake, which this Mission suffered on the memorable day of the glorious Apostle St. Thomas, entirely destroyed the church and vestry, buried under the walls the various images and paintings, and ruined the greater part of the furniture. Some of the workshops went down. One hundred houses of neophyte Indians and the community kitchen, the walls of which were an adobe and a half thick, and roofed with tiles, have become unserviceable. The garden walls of adobe, covered with tiles, have collapsed or threaten to fall. Experience may teach us the best method of constructing other buildings. The earthquake destroyed several statues and paintings, and ruined most of the adornments. The ecclestical vestments were not damaged since they were in drawers. The possessions and furnishings of the mission have also suffered; some are smashed, others broken, and all are damaged, not to mention the inclement weather and copious rains which fell immediately afterwards, allowing us no time to dig out or to re-roof what is still precariously standing.”

The original mission was on the edge of a marsh and on sloping ground, which probably contributed to the extent of damage. Ripoll and Payeras recommended moving the mission to a dry and level location. “Those structures which leaned to the south, fell

to the south, those which leaned to the north, fell to the north, and those that had a naturally flat floor, and were even, were not damaged at all, like the houses and the large, tall granary of our Rancho de San Antonio." This indicates that buildings on level ground, in the general vicinity of the mission, were not damaged.

Learning from the earthquake, the Padres constructed a new mission across the river in Los Berros Canyon. Rather than build the complex in the traditional quadrangle configuration, the mission was designed in a straight line. Stone buttresses were used to fortify the structures. The mission's new location was doubly advantageous, as it was across the river, eliminating the isolation experienced at the former location during winter flooding. In addition, the new site was immediately adjacent to the established El Camino Real, which linked California's network of missions.

A few remains of the original mission are still visible at the end of South F Street. Most of the adobe walls have returned to the earth and artifacts remain buried, frozen in time. The large crack in the hill to the south however, still serves as a silent reminder of nature's wrath.