

## THE STORY OF A PLAZA

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In Spanish-American countries the plaza is the center of community life—the heart from which the arterial blood of the pueblo or ciudad circulates. Around the plaza are usually grouped the government buildings and the principal churches. Like the forum of old Rome it is a place where questions of state are discussed and where sometimes revolutionary plots are hatched. It is a meeting place of the people to exchange gossip and to retail the day's doings.

Los Angeles, being a town of Spanish birth, has its plaza, but its royal square has long since ceased to be the center of communal life or a political hotbed for the germinating of revolutions. When Governor Felipe de Neve, nearly one hundred and twenty years ago, founded the pueblo of our Lady of the Angels his first act was to locate a plaza for the geographical center from which his town should radiate. De Neve's plaza was rectangular in form—seventy-five varas wide by one hundred in length. It was located north of the church; its southerly line very nearly coincided with what is now the northerly line of West Marchessault street. On this, the cuartel, or guard house, the public granary, the government house and the capilla or chapel, fronted.

In 1814, when the foundation of the Nueva Iglesia, or new church, was laid, it, too, fronted on the old Plaza; but the great flood of 1815 changed the river's channel from the eastern side of the valley to the western and the waters came up to the foundations; the location of the church was changed to higher ground—its present site. When the final location of the Nueva Iglesia had been decided upon by Gov. Sola in 1818, next in importance was a plaza on which the church should front and since there was none, the evolution of plaza from the ejidos or common land and house lots began. There were evidently some buildings on the designated area, for we find in the old records that the pueblo authorities, in 1825, ordered a house torn down that stood on the Plaza.

Previous to 1818, the trend of the pueblo's growth had been to the northward, but after the location of a site for the new church had been determined the movement to the southward began. June

21, 1821, Jose Antonio Carrillo, one of the aristocrats of the ancient pueblo regime, petitioned the Comisionado for a house lot near the "new temple which is being built for the benefit of our holy religion." A lot 40x60 varas (the present site of the Pico House or National Hotel as it is now called) was granted him. On this lot between 1821 and 1823 Carrillo built, for that time, quite an aristocratic residence, fronting it on the Plaza. It had a wing extending along the line of Main street and one running back from its eastern end to a cross wall, thus inclosing a patio or inner court. Its high gabled roof of red tiles and its white walls gave it an imposing appearance. Its spacious ballroom witnessed many a gay assemblage of the beauty and the chivalry of the pueblo.

Plaza fronts became the fashion with the pueblo aristocracy; and in course of time the homes of the Picos, the Carrillos, the Sepulvedas, the Olveras, the Lugos, and the Abilas were clustered around the square.

There seems to have been no "plano" or plot made of the new Plaza. The building line zigzagged. A moderate deviation was not noticed, but if some one built out too far the authorities pulled down his casa. In 1838, the city authorities ordered Santiago Rubio's house demolished "to maintain the Plaza line." Santiago seems to have been fired with an ambition to outdo his neighbors in Plaza front or rather by building out to obtain three Plaza fronts, but his pride got a fall and so did his house.

When the vacant lots with Plaza fronts were all built upon, the irregular shape of what was originally intended to be a square became more noticeable. So the Ayuntamiento (Council) set to work to solve the problem of squaring the Plaza, but it proved to be as difficult a problem as squaring the circle. Commissioners were appointed and they labored faithfully to evolve plans to remedy "certain imperfections which have been allowed to creep into the form of the Plaza through carelessness; and to add to the beauty of the town by embellishing the Plaza." But like many a commission since then they encountered opposition to their laudable efforts.

Pedro Cabrera's house lot fell within the line of a street that it was proposed to open out to the westward from the Plaza. The Commissioners offered him a larger and better lot in exchange, but Pedro would none of it. He wanted a Plaza front and the new lot had none. Then the Commissioners offered him another lot and for damages the labor of the chain gang for a certain number of days. The pueblo treasury was empty—there was neither a horse nor a hide in the street fund and the prisoners' labor was all

the compensation they could offer. But Pedro was inexorable. He did not propose to be sidetracked in the social scale by losing his Plaza front, so the street had to take a twist around his lot, and half a century has not untwined the twist that Pedro's pride gave the Calle Iglesia (Church street), now West Marchessault. By reducing its dimensions and by giving the lot owners who had built back the land between them and the new building line the Ayuntamiento succeeded in partially squaring the Plaza. The north, south and west lines, after squaring, were each 134 varas or about 380 feet in length and the east line was 112 varas or 330 feet long. At that time Los Angeles street (or Vineyard street, as it was then called) ended at Arcadia and the principal entrance into the Plaza from the south was the Calle de Los Negros—the street of the blacks—vulgarily known in later times as Nigger Alley.

The Old Plaza has been the scene of many a tragedy and of comedies not a few. In the stormy days of Mexican rule when revolutions and pronunciamientos were the escape valves of the pent-up patriotism of California politicians, many a time has it echoed the tread of armed men. Many a gaily-caparisoned cavalcade has ridden forth from it to do battle for the country or rather a part of it; for in most of these contests it was Californian against Californian—the patriots of the south against the rebels of the north and vice versa.

In the Civil War of 1837-38, the "Surenos" (Southerners) were defeated by the Northerners of Monterey at the bloodless battle of San Buenaventura, with a heavy loss of mustangs; and the unfortunates of the southern army who had escaped capture were compelled to foot it home to Los Angeles—an insult too grievous to be tamely borne by the proud caballeros of the south. But greater indignities were in store for them. While footsore and weary they slumbered; in the thick darkness of night—there were no street lamps in the pueblo then—Capt. Espinoza, with a detachment of the northern army stole into the sleeping town. Capturing the drowsy picket guard, he encamped on the Plaza. In the morning when the artistocrats of the Plaza fronts opened their doors they were confronted by armed men. From headquarters on the Plaza, Espinoza began a search for the concealed statesmen and warriors of the pueblo; and ere the set of sun, a dozen or more of the leading men of the south were forced to begin a weary march (or ride) of 600 miles to Vallejo bastille at Sonoma, where as prisoners of state—Alvarado's free State of Alta California—they whiled away the long summer days in durance vile.

In the revolution of 1845, from their military headquarters in the curate's house, Pico and Castro mobilized their allies on the Plaza and in command of 400 caballeros they rode forth to battle against Micheltorena's army of chicken-stealing cholos and Sutter's warriors in bronze. Victorious over Mexican and Indian on the battlefield of Cahuenga, they returned again to the Plaza to receive the plaudits of mothers, sisters, wives and sweethearts.

But the old Plaza long ago ceased to be a storm center of political disturbance. Across the plains of the Laguna came the Saxon invader and from the mesa his cannon sounded the death knell of Mexican domination in California.

The Plaza beheld its last military pageant when in 1847 Stockton's invading army, 600 strong, entered the subjugated city and marching up the Calle Principal to the stirring strains of "Yankee Doodle" and "Hail Columbia," it camped on the public square. The music of Stockton's famous brass band as it floated out on the evening air, did more, it is said, to smooth the creases out of "war's wrinkled front" than all the treaties and conciliatory proclamations of the gringo commanders.

But peace hath her pageants as well as war; and the old Plaza has been the scene of many a gay fiesta, many a brilliant civic parade, and many a solemn church procession, as well. During the Mexican era it witnessed the inauguration ceremonies of two Governors of California. The first were those of Carlos Carrillo, sometimes called the Pretender. On the 6th of December, 1837, Governor Don Carlos Carrillo, "accompanied by a magnificent calcade" (so an old record says), entered the city and crossing the Plaza took the oath of office in the Juzgado or Hall of Sessions and at the head of his retinue he repaired to the church, where he listened to a solemn mass. For three nights, in honor of the occasion, the Plaza fronts were brilliantly illuminated and the big cannon on the square boomed forth the glad tidings that Los Angeles was the capital of California, and that she had a Governor of her own. Then Alvarado, the *de facto* Governor, came down from Monterey with his northern hordes and Carlos, the Pretender, fled to the wilds of San Diego. Later on he was captured, and a prisoner was taken back to his rancho and to his wife at San Buenaventura, where he lived happily ever afterwards. Los Angeles mourned a lost Governor and a lost capital, but she, too, was happier for the loss of both if she only could have realized it.

The next inaugural services held on the Plaza were those of Manuel Micheltorena, the last of the Mexican-born Governors of

California. He took the oath of office New Year's eve, 1842, in Sanchez Hall, which until quite recently stood on the eastern side of the square. An inauguration ball, that lasted a week, followed. The Plaza fronts were again brilliantly illuminated and cannon boomed forth a glad welcome to the new Governor—cannon that but two years later sounded the trump of his doom at the battle of Cahuenga.

One of the most imposing of the church festivals in which the Plaza figured in the olden time was the festival of Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi is celebrated forty days after Easter; and is intended to commemorate the ascension of the Body of Christ into Heaven. Every year, before the festival, the Plaza was swept and cleansed of rubbish, and enramadas, or booths, of boughs constructed in front of the principal houses; and altars erected. The celebration of this festival by processions on the Plaza was continued after the American occupation—indeed, down to within the past 25 years. From the Weekly Star of June 5, 1858, I extract the following description of the celebration of that year:

“Immediately after Pontifical Vespers, which were held in the church at 4 p. m., a solemn procession was formed which made the circuit of the Plaza, stopping at the various altars which with great cost, elegance and taste had been erected in front of the houses where the sacred offices of the church were solemnly performed. The order of the procession was as follows: Music—Young Ladies of the Sisters' School bearing the banner of the school, followed by the children of the school to the number of 120 in two ranks. They were elegantly dressed in white, wearing white veils and carrying baskets filled with flowers which during the procession were scattered before the Bishop and the clergy. Next came the boys of the church choir. Then twelve men bearing candles; these represented the twelve apostles. Then came Father Raho and Bishop Amat, bearing the Blessed Sacrament, supported on each side by the clergy, marching under a gorgeous canopy carried by four prominent citizens. These were followed by a long procession of men, women and children marching two and two. The procession was escorted by the California Lancers, Captain Juan Sepulveda commanding, and the Southern Rifles, Captain W. W. Twist in command.

“Very elaborate and costly preparations had been made by the citizens resident on the Plaza for the reception of the Holy Eucharist; among the most prominent of which we noticed the residence of Don Jesus Dominguez, Don Ignacio Del Valle, Don Vin-

cente Lugo and Don Augustin Olvera. These altars were elegantly designed and tastefully decorated, being ornamented with laces, silks, satins and diamonds. In front of each the procession stopped whilst sacred offices appropriate to the occasion were performed.

"Having made the circuit of the Plaza, the procession returned to the church, where the services were concluded. After which the immense assemblage dispersed, and the military escorted the young ladies of the Sisters' School on their return home."

Patroness Day or the fiesta of Our Lady of the Angels was another occasion in which the Plaza played a most important part. It is celebrated August 15th. The Mother of Christ, according to the Catholic doctrine, did not die but was taken up into Heaven, where she is continually adored by all the heavenly throng of angels and archangels as their queen. The following description of the celebration of that festival I take from the Star of August 22, 1857:

"At the conclusion of mass the pupils of the female school headed by their instructresses, the Sisters of Charity, come out of the church in procession bearing the image Our Lady under a canopy. They were joined by the Lancers and passing around the public square re-entered the church. The appearance of the procession as it left the church and during its march was imposing. The canopy covering the representation of the angelic queen, tastefully ornamented, was borne by girls dressed in white. The girls of the school with their heads uncovered and in uniform white dresses, followed; then came the lancers, the rear of the company being brought up by a mounted division armed with lances. There was an evening procession on the Plaza. A bull-fight took place in the upper part of town in the afternoon, which was attended by a dense crowd. One hombre attempting to perform some exploits on foot which are usual at bull-fights in Lima and Mexico, was caught and tossed high in air a number of times by an infuriated bull and left for dead. A number of horses were badly gored and some killed outright. This branch of amusement was kept up for three days to the evident delight of the boys and great suffering and ruin of many a noble steed."

In the olden times, before gringo influence had wrought changes in social customs, when the Christmas festivities broke the monotony of pueblo life and the "Pastores"—(the shepherds)—a fragment of the passion plays of the Middle Ages, that had survived the lapse of time and crossed the wide expanse of sea and land between Europe and the western shores of the sunset sea—were played by amateur actors, often has the old Plaza resounded with shouts of mirth

at the undoing of the arch fiend, Satan, by the archangel, Michael. But after the change of rulers, in the days of gold Satan had his innings and the Plaza was given over to lawlessness, and vice ran riot on its borders. The Calle de Los Negros was as black in character as in name. For its length and opportunities it was the wickedest street on earth. Saloons, dance houses and gambling hells lined its walks and the high tide of its iniquities swept over the Plaza.

In 1854 it is said that Los Angeles averaged a homicide for each day of that year. The Plaza borders and the Calle de Los Negros were the principal battle fields where most of the victims bit the dust.

The criminal element became bold and defiant; robbers and murderers terrorized the community. Then the law-abiding citizens arose in their might and in the shape of vigilance committees and military organization put an end to the saturnalia of crime, and to many of the criminals as well. The gallows tree on Fort Hill bore gruesome fruit and the beams over corral gates were sometimes festooned with the hangman's noose. In less than a year twenty-two criminals, bandits, murderers and thieves, were hung in accordance with the laws or without law whichever was most convenient or most expeditious; and more than twice that number expatriated themselves for the country's good, and their own. After its purification by hemp, the Old Plaza became a thing of utility, and was made the distributing point for a water system. In 1857, the City Council granted to Judge William G. Dryden the right to convey the water from his springs, located on the low ground southeast of where the River Station now is, "over, under and through the streets, lanes, alleys and roads of the city, and distribute it for domestic purposes."

Dryden raised the water by means of a pump propelled by a current wheel placed in the Zanja Madre into a reservoir on the Plaza, from whence it was distributed by pipes to the houses in the neighborhood. When Messrs. Griffin, Beaudry and their associates obtained the thirty years' lease of the city water works, one of the conditions of that lease was the building within a year at a cost not to exceed \$1000 of an ornamental spring fountain on the Plaza. Another condition was the payment by the company to the city of \$1500 a year for the rent of the water works.

Juan Bernard and Patrick McFadden, who had acquired possession of the Dryden franchise and water works, disposed of their system and the old brick reservoir on the Plaza came into the

possession of the City Water Company, the successors of Griffin, Beaudry, et al.

A year passed and no fountain played on the Plaza, another year waned and passed away and still the Plaza was fountainless. A third year was passing and still the unsightly debris of the old reservoir disfigured the center of the square. At a meeting of the Council, Dec. 2, 1870, the late Judge Brunson, attorney of the City Water Company, submitted the following propositions as a settlement of what he styled "the much vexed question of the reservoir and Plaza improvements:"

The Water Company will remove the reservoir from the Plaza and deed all its rights and interests in and to the Plaza to the city of Los Angeles; will build a good and substantial fence around said Plaza; will lay it off in ornamental walks and grounds; will erect on it an ornamental fountain at a cost not to exceed \$1,000 and will surrender to the city all city water scrip (about \$3,000) now held by the company; provided said city will for the considerations named above reduce the rent (\$1,500 a year) now paid by the company to said city under a certain contract made July 22, 1868, to the sum of \$300 per annum. Some of the Councilmen demurred to giving up \$1,200 a year "for very little return."

Then Judge Brunson executed one of those brilliant legal "coup de etats" for which he was famous. He threatened to bring suit against the city to defend the Water Company's rights. McFadden, one of the former owners of the reservoir, stated to the Council that the Water Company had no right to the Plaza except the right to use it as a reservoir site, and since the company had ceased to use the reservoir the Plaza reverted to the city. But the Council, frightened at the prospect of a law suit and fearful of losing the Plaza, hastened to compromise on the basis of \$400 a year rental instead of the \$1,500 specified in the original contract.

The fence was built, the walks were laid, and the ornamental fountain, too, was erected by the company, and for nearly thirty years it has spurted the crystal river water into the moss-covered basin where the gold fish play.

During the time of Spanish and Mexican domination in California, the Plaza was a treeless common; its surface pawed into ridges or trodden into dust by the hoofs of the numerous mustangs tethered on it or ridden over it. It had, however, its annual spring cleaning and decoration for the festival of Corpus Christi.

For a decade or more after the American occupation its appearance was unchanged. The first attempt at its improvement was

made by the city authorities in 1859. It was enclosed by a picket fence, walks were laid off and some shrubbery planted. But in those days the city exchequer was in a chronic state of collapse and the improvements made were not kept up. The tethered mustangs gnawed the pickets and wandering goats nibbled the shrubbery. The Plaza gradually lapsed into its former state of dilapidation. In 1870 the City Water Company took it in hand and made the improvements named above. Its form was changed from a square to a circle.

In the four score years that have passed since the old Plaza was evolved from a chaos of ejidos and house lots, the flags of kingdoms, empires and republics have floated over it. In the beginning of its history the imperial banner of Spain waved on its borders. It was supplanted by the tri-color of the Mexican empire. Next was raised the cactus-perched eagle flag of the Mexican republic; on its downfall up rose the Stars and Stripes; and now above the ruined homes of the old Dons floats in the breeze the dragon flag of China.

Three distinct forms of civilization and several forms of savages as well have met on its borders. The pastoral Latin with his easy-going manners and customs and mode of life long since gave way to the aggressive Saxon; and the Saxon in turn has been pushed aside by the Mongol. There have been race wars on the Plaza borders. Many of our older citizens will recall the incipient revolution of 1856, when a number of the Mexican population rose in protest against a grievous wrong done one of their people and, armed, they assembled on the Plaza with cries of down with the Americans, and "Viva Mexico!" The uprising ended with the exchange of a number of shots between the combatants, the wounding of the City Marshal and the death of a horse. But the Mongolian massacre of 1871 was a more sanguinary affair. One American was shot to death and eighteen Chinamen were either shot or hanged on that wild night of mob rule.

The Plaza offers many an object lesson in the cosmopolitan characteristics of our population. There the civilizations and religions of the Occident and the Orient meet but do not mingle. Each maintains its own customs and beliefs and scorns those of the other. From the eastern border of the old Plaza a heathen temple devoted to the worship of the Chinese god, Joss, confronts one, on the western side of the square a Christian church dedicated to the worship of the Christian God. The little brown man of the Orient staggers along the streets of the public square weighed down

by the burdens he carries balanced from the end of a bamboo pole brought from his native land—burdens carried today as his ancestors bore them in ages long past; while the white man's burdens, (or at least a part of them), and himself, too, are borne along by electricity and steam—motive powers which the man of the Occident has harnessed down to do his bidding. The flash of the one and the roar of the other as they "swish" their burdens past the borders of the old Plaza dissipate the romantic fantasies of its by-gone days and leave to the memory of the passerby instead only a hasty glimpse of a common meeting place of two civilizations—the one living, the other dying.