

THE TRUE HISTORY OF CENTRAL PARK.

BY J. M. GUINN.

There is perhaps no other great city in the United States whose inhabitants know so little of the early history of their city as do the great majority of the dwellers in Los Angeles, of theirs. This may be accounted for in part by the fact that its founders and early inhabitants were of a different nationality to its present citizens. No founders' or forefathers' day keeps alive the traditions and the memories of the olden time.

The present inhabitants are so intent on boosting the city and speculating in corner lots that they have no time to familiarize themselves with the history of their city, ancient or modern. Newspaper reporters and sensational story mongers presuming on the general ignorance of its people in regard to the early history of their city fabricate canards and publish accounts of imaginative incidents and events that are ludicrous in their absurdities and palm these off on the public for veritable historical facts, and the credulous public gulps them down with avidity and believes them religiously.

Commenting on the opening of Central Park after it had undergone extensive repairs and improvements amounting to an expenditure of over \$50,000, one of our leading daily newspapers under date of July 1, 1911, publishes the following choice bit of history:

"Central Park has been a public commons since the days of King Charles II. of Spain, that monarch having deeded the plot of ground to the pueblo of Los Angeles in 1781."

Our historian continues: "After the park, one of the oldest pieces of ground devoted to park purposes in America, had been given the public by King Charles II. it deteriorated to such an extent that in 1870 a committee of Los Angeles citizens composed of J. M. Griffith, O. W. Childs, Andrew Glassell and P. Beaudry was appointed to improve it."

Another of our leading newspapers advocated the naming of the park for King Carlos II., its donor.

Now all this is quite romantic, but in the light of the true history

of the park it is ludicrously absurd. King Charles II. died in the year 1700—sixty-nine years before the first settlement was made in California and eighty-one years before King Charles III. authorized the founding of the pueblo of Los Angeles and granted it four square leagues of land from the public domain; and he too had been dead seventy-eight years before that rectangular piece of land—Block 15 of Ord's Survey—containing about five acres—and now known as Central Park was dedicated by the City Council "for a public square or plaza for the use and benefit of the citizens in common of said City of Los Angeles."

The following historical sketch of Central Park has been compiled from official records and it also contains the author's reminiscences and observations of it covering a period of forty-three years. It was published in the Los Angeles Evening Express July 11, 1911:

Central Park is undergoing one of its many transformations. When this one is completed it will be a "thing of beauty and a joy"—until some other park commission gets busy on it. The old-timers, in early days, remember it as a treeless common where the town goats and stray mustangs nibbled the scant herbage.

There is a tradition which crops out periodically that the man who donated the park grounds to the city died in the poorhouse. It is true that the alleged donor, George Lehman, "Roundhouse George," died in the county hospital but he did not donate the park site, for the very good reason that it never was his to donate.

It is one of the few pieces or parcels of the vast municipal domain known as pueblo lands that we inherited from Spain, or, to speak more in accordance with facts, that we wrested by conquest from Mexico, which has never been sold or given away. King Carlos III of Spain was the donor of the park in about the way that a president of the United States is when government land is sold or given away. Under Spanish rule in America, a pueblo was a legally organized form of settlement entitled to a tract of land (usually four square leagues) for various community uses.

The pueblo plan of colonization was used in Spanish American countries two centuries before the time of King Carlos III. Pueblo lands were transferred by municipal authorities, not by a king. Both Westlake and Elysian Parks, as well as Central Park, are parts of the pueblo lands that have never been alienated from municipal ownership.

After the conquest of California by the Americans, a portion of the pueblo lands lying between First and Twelfth Streets, Main

and Grasshopper (now Figueroa) Streets was subdivided into lots and blocks by Lieutenant Ord, Central Park is block 15 of Ord's survey.

This survey was made in 1849 and a number of the lots fronting on Main, Spring and Fort Streets were put on sale. The maximum price for Ord Survey lots, 120x165 feet, in the "days of '49" was \$50 each. With the decadence of mining and the decreased demand for cattle—the chief product of the South—the city became a case of arrested development.

Ord's Survey lots on Main, Spring and Fort Streets could be bought in the early '60's at the prices of 10 years before, namely 30 to 50 cents per front foot. There was no temptation to invest in lots beyond the settled portion of the city; consequently the blocks west of Hill Street remained practically intact.

There was another reason why settlers did not locate on lots on Olive and Charity (Grand Avenue) Streets near the base of the western hills. The Arroyo de Los Reyes, rising in the northwestern part of the city, debouched into the plain at the base of the hill on which the Normal School now stands. It crossed Olive Street north of Sixth and cut a corner off the prospective park, then it zigzagged in a deep channel through the blocks between Hill, Olive and Charity Streets down to Washington Street.

In the Spring of the year there was considerable water in it and innumerable frogs nightly held concerts along its reedy brink. As the season advanced, millions of mosquitoes hatched in the stagnant pools of the arroyo of the kings and made night a horror to the dwellers on its banks. These appurtenances to real estate in that locality made it undesirable for first-class residences.

The Camino viejo (old road) that developed along the trail that Portola's explorers made in 1769 cut a triangle off the corner of block 15 at Olive and Fifth Streets. This old road made nearly a century and a half ago, of which North Spring Street is the last remnant, cut diagonally across the blocks between First and Third, Spring and Broadway. It crossed Hill Street at Fourth and Olive at Fifth. It passed out of the old pueblo limits near Ninth Street, where it forked one branch leading to the Cahuenga Pass and the other to the brea beds on the Racho La Brea, where the inhabitants of the old pueblo obtained their roofing material (crude asphaltum).

For nearly a century after the founding of the pueblo of Los Angeles this road was the camino real or main-traveled road leading westward out of town. More than 60 years ago the court of sessions decreed it as one of the six camino reales that led out of the old pueblo.

For years after Ord made his survey the people ignored his streets and came into town across lots.

Thirty years ago, at the gate entrance to the park at the corner of Sixth and Olive and also at the entrance at Fifth and Hill, there were large signs that read "Heavy teams are forbidden to cross the park," but as there was no guard to prevent and no penalty to enforce, heavy teams and light, horseman and footman took the short cut into town through the park.

The setting apart of block 15 for a park dates back 45 years. In 1866 the City Council passed an ordinance "disposing of certain lots at public auction and reserving others for a public square." Section 3 of this ordinance reads as follows:

"Lots from Nos. 1 to 10 in block 15 of Ord's Survey of said city are hereby set aside for the use of said city and the residents thereof as a public square, and the same is hereby declared to be a public square or plaza for the use and benefit of the citizens in common of said city, remaining under the control of the mayor and council of said city."

The ordinance was approved and signed Dec. 11, 1866, by C. Aguilar, mayor. Cristobal Aguilar was the last Spanish-American mayor of Los Angeles.

Four years passed and still the public square was a treeless and grassless common. Times were hard and money scarce, but there were public-spirited citizens then as now, who were willing to devote their time and money to the improvement of the city.

Early in 1870 a public meeting was called to discuss the question of improving the public square. It was decided to raise by subscription funds sufficient to fence it.

In those days the mustang and the bovine were free to roam where fancy or feed attracted them, and the first preliminary was to fence them out. There was no law to compel their owners to fence them in.

At that meeting the square was named Los Angeles Park and it was decided to petition the council to dedicate it for a park and authorize a committee appointed at that meeting to improve it. The following ordinance was passed by the council:

"Section 1. Whereas the block bounded as follows: On the east by Hill, south by Sixth, west by Olive and north by Fifth Street, has been reserved for some public purpose, and whereas an association of gentlemen have subscribed funds for the purpose of fencing and ornamenting the aforesaid block of which the following gentlemen are the executive committee, J. M. Griffith,

O. W. Childs, A. Glassell, J. S. Griffin, J. G. Downey and P. Beaudry, be it ordained and by these presents do we ordain that the above named association be allowed to fence in and ornament with fruit and forest trees the aforesaid block, and be it also ordained that the aforesaid block be declared a public place forever for the enjoyment of the community in general."

The ordinance was passed Nov. 17, 1870.

The committee secured and expended \$600 in fencing and improving the park. This did not complete the work. Evidently some had wearied in well-doing.

February, 1872, the committee reported to the council that a number of the subscribers had failed to pay their subscriptions and that work on the park had been suspended. The committee recommended that the council vote \$1000 to complete the fence and plant trees. The request was granted and May 28, 1872, a sub-committee consisting of Workman, Beaudry and Macy, reported the fence completed at a cost of \$685. The balance of the appropriation would be used in painting the fence and other improvements, but the committee advised that no more work be done on the park at expense to the city.

It is said that George Lehman, "Roundhouse George," planted the first trees in the park and carried water in oil cans to irrigate them. He was one of a committee to collect subscriptions. From his activity in improving the park came the tradition that he donated it to the city.

Besides the Garden of Paradise, a suburban pleasure resort just south of Third Street and extending from Main through to Spring Street, on which was located the roundhouse, he owned the southwest corner of Spring and Sixth Street. On this lot back from the street until quite a recent date stood an old brick house on the front of which was painted, "Georgetown, 1859." That suburb of the city then was known as Georgetown.

There was no lawn planted in the park for a number of years after it was inclosed. The water was not piped that far down.

An open ditch supplied the park with water. This ditch branched off from the Zanja Madre, or mother ditch, near Requena Street (East Market) then flowed down between Los Angeles and South Main Streets, irrigating the vineyards and vegetable gardens that covered the present sites of business blocks and hotels; it crossed Main Street below Fourth Street, and passed just south of the Union Trust skyscraper, then zigzagged across the blocks from Spring and Hill Streets, entering the park at the southwest corner of Hill and Fifth Street, and running along its Fifth and Olive

Street fronts, it passed out of the park at Sixth and Olive Streets. Then it meandered out to the rural regions of Figueroa and Adams Streets. Up to 1885 this ditch was an open channel, then it was piped and carried underground across the business streets.

In the 45 years of its existence the park has had a number of different names. It was first known as the public square; later as St. Vincent Park, Los Angeles Park and Sixth Street Park. It was sometimes called La Plaza Abaja—the lower plaza. On some of the old city maps it is marked “plaza.”

When the city began to develop other parks further out, it was officially named Central Park. The first plan of the park was diagonal walks or rather drives along the lines where the present bricked walks are. When the old fence was pulled down and the ditch filled, the park grounds were laid out in serpentine walks, lawns planted, and a bandstand built.

About 20 years ago a bond election was called to erect a library building in the park. The believers in the tradition of Roundhouse George's reversionary donation of the park; the windjammers who at that time infested it in great numbers, and wailed over the robbery of the poor man of a public forum in which to air his grievances; and the men afraid of taxes all combined and defeated the bond issue, and our library is still a wanderer and a homeless waif.