

When San Jose Was Young

A Series of Interesting Articles of An Historical Nature Prepared Especially for The News by a Well Known Author and Journalist.

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THE SURVIVOR

There lives today only one person who was present when Andres Castillero made his experiment at the Santa Clara Mission resulting in the discovery of quicksilver at the New Almaden mine. This person is Jesuita, eldest living daughter of Secundino Robles. She is now Mrs. Espinoza a widow who lives opposite the lumber yard in Gilroy.

Mrs. Espinoza is eighty years of age, but, like so many of the Spanish Californians her hair is almost black. The Robles were Castilians, and Mrs. Espinoza shows the purity of her origin. She is fair, with a finely chiseled nose, and a broad high forehead. Neither her mind nor body has lost its activity. Her memory is excellent, and reverts easily to that day in 1845 when Andres, Castillero came riding to the mission from Sutter's Fort. Castillero was a picturesque man who attracted events. From the moment he reached Santa Clara life began to throb.

Secundino Robles was major domo of the Mission. Longer than any white man he had known of the existence of the cave in the ground where the Indians got the red paint for painting their faces flame color. The Indians were fire worshippers. They tried to make their faces look like flame.

According to Mrs. Espinoza, in 1824 Secundino Robles, accompanied by an Indian, was hunting Yoscolo, the ter-

rrible black young chief who was making raids on the Mission. Robles thought that Yoscolo had hidden in the cave. He told his Indian companion to enter the cave to see if Yoscolo was there hidden.

The Indian was afraid. "No, the Indian devil is in the cave."

Robles replied, "Go into the cave and look for Yoscolo."

The Indian went, but he came out without either Yoscolo or the devil. However, he had a handful of quicksilver quartz. By its weight Robles knew that it was rich. But until the brilliant, versatile, political, medical, mining-engineer-promoter, Castillero, arrived at Santa Clara the quartz baffled all trying to determine its value.

Among those especially interested in the quartz was that charming, dashing priest, Father Real, who used to love to ride fast horses and wear a scarlet sash. When the saintly Franciscans protested against Father Real's worldliness he said, "Oh, I'm not one of you Spanish friars. I'm a Mexican." Perhaps Father Real was all the more popular among laymen for his horsemanship and his scarlet washes.

The experiment that Castillero made with the ore, Mrs. Espinoza the other day told me, took place in Father Real's dining room at the Santa Clara Mission. At the time she was eleven

years old, but she remembers well the event. She recalls the name of those present. In addition to Castillero, Father Real, Secundino Robles and Jose Castro given by all historians, she says that Ignacio Alviso was also there. Of course, the historian entirely overlooked the little eleven-year-old girl, Jesuita Robles, who watched Castillero crush the quartz, light the fire and sprinkle it with water.

Mrs. Espinoza says that the experiment was made exactly as it has been described. She tells of the eagerness of all. "The chimney held over the bricks to catch the vapor grew very black and smoky. For a few minutes Castillero went out of the room. He told me to watch the chimney. I did. When he came back he found the quicksilver bubbles. There was wild excitement. We all thought we were rich. My father rushed out and told everyone what happened. He rang the Mission bells."

And indeed history had been made. The mine was named by Castillero the New Almaden. Secundino Robles became a rich man through his quarter interest in the discovery. Gradually he lost his money and his great estate. Stanford University stands on a part of the Robles grant, but Secundino Robles, the handsomest Californian of his time in this part of the country, died in great poverty many years ago. His widow long survived him in great need. His children also have met the terrible fate of Spanish Californians, anxiety for the morrow's bread.