

**The Franciscan missions of California (John A. Berger, 1941) courtesy of Kansas City Public Library and G.P. Putnam's Sons (New York - founded 1830): submitted by Judy Blackman**

The Franciscan Missions of California are the physical landmarks of one of the most remarkable undertakings in recorded history. Certainly no episode in the white man's conquest of the present United States is more amazing. In contrast to the procedure of deliberate extermination as carried out along the Eastern seaboard, the Spanish conquerors of California made a valiant effort to raise the native Indians to their own standards of civilization. The instrument employed in this ambitious venture was the marvellous mission system developed by the Jesuits and adopted by the Franciscans. Although the whole futile undertaking lasted only 65 years, the Mission Period gave California an historical background unsurpassed in interest and romance by the local traditions of any other section of the U.S.A. Nor can any locality boast of better preserved monuments to its pioneers than the remains of its 21 missionary stations. One seldom hears of the paramount services of Jose de Gdlvez or Antonio Bucareli. All praises are reserved for a little band of Franciscan padres whose valiant efforts held the province together during the precarious period of founding. A 1,000 miles removed from the sources of supplies, the conquerors found themselves endeavouring to embrace another 500 miles of undeveloped frontier region thickly populated with a native Indian race. The indigenous people, moreover, were often unfriendly to the newcomers and uninviting to behold. Both women and men were ugly, short, lumpish, and ungainly, with portly abdomens on scrawny legs. Straight coarse black hair was matted over their low foreheads; beady dull eyes were as repelling as the flat noses on their wide and shapeless faces. Only a penchant for petty thievery seemed to rouse them from their sluggish indolence. Except perhaps those resident along the Santa Barbara Channel, the California natives appeared to occupy a level of civilization little above that of the beasts that lurked listlessly about in the shadow of the live-oak thickets.

In the company of the Spanish conquerors the Franciscan missionaries approached those helpless pagans with only one purpose in mind. Despite the discouraging prospects, they proposed to make good Catholics of this pathetic material, which only the kindness of the climate had already preserved from extinction. The story of that heroic effort is almost unique in the annals of man and constitutes one of the most interesting episodes in American history. Through it are woven the golden threads of California's romantic past. The prominence of the Spanish Franciscans in the traditions of the Golden State rests securely upon the numerous records they left of their abundant labours and upon the mission ruins which alone survive as the tangible, obvious memorials of the rich Spanish period.

The chain of 21 missions, stretching from San Diego into the north, is known as "Father Serra's Rosary", in honour of California's most beloved and honoured hero. That Franciscan's unquenchable zeal for converting the heathen was responsible for the inauguration of mission settlement at a time when no other stabilizing influence was effective in the province. Californians can hardly be criticized for their over-emphasis on missionary service, even though historical accuracy demands the explanation of a broader basis for the founding and colonization of that great State by the Catholic sons of Old Spain. Too often Americans have been led to believe that only the English and French came to the shores of the New World to found homes and build permanent empires. The covetous Spaniards, they have been told, in search only of the continent's riches, ruthlessly killed off the native Indians, who had nothing to match their musketry. But a wider acquaintance with the facts will disclose that 2/3 of the Western Hemisphere explored by the 2 small Hispanic nations remains today still Spanish and Portuguese. The late-comers, England, France, Holland, and Russia, were forced to found colonies in the 1/3 which remained beyond the borders of the vast Spanish realm already established to the south. After the initial settlement, which was crammed into a brief 1/2 Century, it was only natural that Spanish northward expansion under the lure of the elusive "Strait of Anian", should follow the coast of their own Pacific Ocean. The present California thus lay in their path. Though only an incident in the great drama enacted by Spain in the New World, the story of her push north of the Colorado River became of vital importance to the budding republic destined to span the continent from the east. It is inevitable that Californians should bask in romance, for even the name of their State has emerged from a fable. Unlike Maryland, Georgia, Virginia, or the Carolinas, California represents no effort to preserve a royal family name. Nor did its founders wait to reach the Land of Heart's Desire to find an Indian title for their discovery. They dug it from a story book. During that extravagant period of transition from medieval to modern times, the florid Spanish romancer, Ordonez de Montalva, wrote *Las Sergas de Esplandidn* (The Deeds of Esplandian) to regale the romantic imaginations of a reading public accustomed to the fantastic novels of chivalry. The romance concerned the strange island of California, "at the right hand of the Indies", inhabited only by women

and ruled by the lovely queen, Calafia. "Their weapons were all made of gold, and so was the harness of the wild beasts they tamed to ride. The island everywhere abounds with gold and precious stones, and upon it no other metal is found / 'Montalva had doubtless discovered the name "Califerene" in the famous Chanson de Roland and employed the Spanish form of that word for his own story.

Spain answered the challenge of enforcing the conversion of the natives to the Catholic faith with the tremendous outburst of exploratory zeal which led to California's discovery. Expedition after expedition went forth into unknown lands and uncharted seas. Faithful to its promise to the church, the Crown sponsored no voyage unless accompanied by the Cross. The religious orders of the Mother Country trained and supplied the missionaries whose enthusiasm for pagan conquests at least equalled that of the ardent explorers. Within 50 years this combination of determined adventurers had reached the shores of California. That accomplishment of Spanish pioneering genius was the more remarkable in view of the geographical isolation of the region. Land approach by white men was, of course unknown. By sea the voyager would be obliged to cross from Europe, round Cape Horn, then overcome the immense obstacles presented by an ocean with northern storms and currents belying the name of "Pacific" bestowed by its first navigator, Magellan. As it happened, the discovery was made by a combination of land and sea expeditions. Swiftly the frontiers were pushed from their cradle in the West Indies, where Spain had found a starting point to try her pioneering wings. To the Indies she transplanted her ancient conventions and experimented with such difficult problems as learning to handle the native labour.....

..... The missionary orders of Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits sent dozens of ardent, pious padres from the Old World into the missionary fields of New Spain. Once arrived, they became direct royal agents of the Crown. Without the consent of the royal authorities, no mission could be founded or any missionary go into the field. In some cases the church was thrust into a venture against its wishes, though usually the missionary ardour surpassed the royal intention..... One day in July 1769 Portola and his party, while proceeding along the coast, they were intercepted by a small party of natives, gesticulating wildly as they hurried down from the interior uplands. In their midst they hurried down from the interior uplands. In their midst came two wailing women, each bearing in her arms a young girl, whom they held up the commander with pitiful supplications. Perceiving at a glance that the children were already at the point of death, Don Gasper de Portola called up Father Gomez, who hastily baptized the girls and gave them the Christian names of "Maria Magdalena" and "Margarita". These two baptisms (which took place where Camp Pendleton is today) among the Diegueno tribe were the first performed in the Upper California province. On the day after the jubilee of Our Lady of the Angels, the party camped on a site which they named for her and "has all the requirements for a large settlement", despite the "many temblores" which had greeted them intermittently for several days. They were, in fact, at the present location of Los Angeles. Nearby they came upon "rivers of pitch" the La Brea asphalt beds and concluded that there must be volcanoes in the vicinity. These first white men in California thus discovered the presence of oil deposits. They were heartened by finding many Castilian roses growing wild and reminding them of their native Spain. Portola kept near the coast where possible and passed along Santa Barbara Channel. There the numerous Indians lived in spherical houses, well-built and roofed with tulle. Fortunately the natives were curious and friendly; they brought welcome gifts of roasted perch and bonitos to the strangers. By partaking frequently of native food, the explorers were unwittingly escaping the ravages of scurvy which had taken such a toll among their companions on the sea route to San Diego.

I recently required a beautiful medallion "Indian Infants Maria Magdalena & Margarita Baptism" as pictured below:

