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AGUA MANSA BELL

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Bell

Agua Mansa Bell without a clapper, but it has a home

Riverside's claim on it goes back to the old settlement

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By TOM PATTERSON

The Agua Mansa Bell, 103 years old and resting placidly and tonelessly on a cement block at Riverside's Mission Inn, apparently isn't going to Colton after all.

The Inn people have explained that they had considered selling it to the Colton Chamber of Commerce as a goodwill gesture, having been told by the Colton people that it belonged there historically.

For many years Colton residents have been saying that.

But now the Inn says it won't sell to Colton unless the Riverside City Council approves, which it doesn't.

Probably no living person has heard the bell's tone, since it has no clapper. The metal loop by which it was originally suspended is broken.

What is its story? How did it get to Colton from Agua Mansa, where it originated? How long did it stay in Colton? Was it Riverside or Colton that succeeded Agua Mansa when that town died?

Mrs. Esther Klotz, on behalf of the Riverside Museum, has located the story of the bell's move from the Church of San Salvador in South Colton to the Mission Inn. That was in May, 1918. It has been owned and displayed by the Inn since then, nearly 51 years.

For the previous 30 to 35 years it had been in Colton.

And for its first 20 years, more or less, it had hung at the little Church of San Salvador in vanished Agua Mansa. It had been cast in a home-made sand mold on a hillside near there in 1866.

Presumably this hillside would be the river bluff, at the base of which the church stood on a kind of ledge above the riverbottom homes.

The claim of the Riverside community on the bell goes back to its origins in Agua Mansa, not only to its long-time ownership by the Inn.

Father Peter Verdaguer was a bishop of the church in Laredo, Tex., in 1903 when he described the origin of the bell for "Ingersoll's Century Annals of San Bernardino County."

In 1863 he became pastor of the Church of San Salvador, serving Agua Mansa and its neighboring community of La Placita. They occupied opposite sides of the Santa Ana River above later Riverside.

The church's old bell had been

hung in a tree because there was no belfry in the church. It was cracked and not usable.

Originally, the church had been in La Placita, in a temporary shelter. In 1853, the residents built what was intended to be a permanent building. It was in La Placita, later called Spanishtown by Riverside.

They built too near the stream, on what appeared to be solid ground but was apparently underlain by quicksand.

As they were finishing the job the walls trembled and collapsed. So the church was rebuilt in Agua Mansa, probably in 1854.

The flood of 1862 washed away virtually all the adobe homes of the two villages and exchanged the soil for sand. The church stood at the foot of the bluff, and the flood came to its step.

Only the church and the nearby home of Cornelius Jensen, the former Danish sea captain, survived the flood.

Father Verdaguer wanted a new bell. To collect the \$50 or \$60 necessary to buy one was out of the question. A resident of the area said he could cast one for \$12 and two horses.

Jensen, the captain, was ready to help. But there wasn't enough usable metal, because Father Verdaguer wanted a large bell.

It is the oft-recalled tradition of the descendants of the villages that the people gave their jewelry, their table silver, their trinkets for the bell.

But Father Verdaguer went beyond the two communities to collect the money, metal and horses.

"The next day," he wrote, "I borrowed a horse and buggy and set out. I went to the Robidoux rancho, to Rincon, Temescal and Santa Ana, and I got the twelve dollars and had no difficulty in getting the horses, and I got all the material I needed, also."

The Robidoux ranch house was in present Rubidoux. Rincon was a rancho northwest of Corona. Temescal was southeast of Corona. Riverside, Corona and Colton weren't started yet.

San Bernardino was the next town to the north, but its earlier Spanish-speaking settlers had vanished and the new settlement was English-speaking. Agua Mansa apparently was oriented southward then.

Father Verdaguer described the casting:

"The man went to work at once at the foot of the small hill where Mr. Jensen's house stood; he made the oven and the moulder and soon the bell was made. Hundreds of people were present when the Mexican broke the mould, and when the bell was seen there was a shouting which resounded from hill to hill.

"But, alas, the joy was soon changed to sorrow, because we noticed on one side at the top two small holes, which not only disfigured the bell, but were the cause that its sound was not as pleasant as we expected."

Agua Mansa never fully recovered from the flood of 1862, despite the bell. Larger operators bought the small farms.

Still, the town was big enough in 1890 to have a horse race on its main street, and a dispute, and a murder. This was reported in *The Press*.

Father Juan Caballeria, writing in 1902, said the church lasted for many years before "yielding to the ruthless hand of fate." But the fate was obviously that the people moved, since adobe buildings do not disappear until their roofs leak.

Still, no exact time has been ascertained for the switch of the bell to Colton. Elliott's "History of San Bernardino and San Diego Counties," published in 1883, speaks of it as being in Agua Mansa then. One might guess that it didn't leave until after 1890.

The church in South Colton, according to Father Patrick Guillen, its present pastor, was known in 1883 as the Church of the Holy Rosary.

It later took the name of San Salvador. A guess might be that it did so when it acquired the bell. The church stayed at its original location when it was rebuilt in 1918, but moved farther north after another fire in 1928.

In any case some people in South Colton were aggrieved when the bell

was sold. One David Garcia wrote, in an undated letter that appeared recently in a publication of the San Bernardino County Museum, that the bell "was fraudulently sold to the Hotel of the Mission."

But was it?

The story of the purchase ap-

peared in *The Press* of May 23, 1918, which said the bell was to be brought to Riverside that day or the next.

Frank Miller, master of the Inn, explained that he had tried earlier to buy the bell for \$1,000 because of its historic connection with Riverside, but that the church wouldn't sell.

He wasn't quoted directly as to what he had finally paid, but *The Press* had information from an unstated source that he had paid \$500 in cash and provided a new bell.

The old building had burned down. A new one was being built. According to *The Press*:

"The reason lying behind the disposal of the bell was the fact that it was heavy and cumbersome, weighing 956 pounds, and it was thought a lighter bell would better suit the needs of the new church."

Was the bell sweet-sounding?

Father Verdager had said that, on account of the two holes, "its sound was not as pleasant as we expected."

Elliott's history said it was "dull sounding."

But Antonio Espinosa, father of Mrs. Marie Wood of Riverside, said it had a "beautiful tone."

Undoubtedly, some of the later residents of Agua Mansa had moved to the Colton area, accounting for the transfer of the bell and of the name of the church.

One reason Marie Wood does not think of the Colton Spanish-speaking colony as the successor to the people of Agua Mansa involves Mexican-California history.

The Agua Mansans and La Placitans were Californios, and a Californio was a special person. He was a Mexican citizen living in California during the Mexican regime. He was isolated from his government in Mexico City and usually felt he was neglected by it and had some hostility toward it.

He also had differences with the

gringo, who supplanted and neglected him.

He was a special person, who didn't feel too much kinship with late Mexican-Americans who came as immigrants from Mexico after, rather than before, the U.S. take-over.

The original Agua Mansans came from the Santa Fe and Taos areas of New Mexico. Some, including Loren Trujillo, were Pueblo Indians. Marie Wood's Martinez ancestors had reached New Mexico from St. Augustine, Fla., to where they had gone from Spain.

The names of the original families of the two towns survive in Riverside and vicinity today through direct descendants — names like Trujillo, Bac Archuleta, Espinosa, Molla (or Moy), Martinez and others. These names are also frequently heard in New Mexico.

During its life, and after it died, a town, Agua Mansa was associated with Riverside. In 1893, when Riverside County was formed, most of Placita and all of Agua Mansa remained in San Bernardino County. In spite of its active interest in many things historical, as indicated by its impressive county museum, that county was slow to take up the protection of the unprotected Agua Mansa Cemetery, though it now has done so.

In the 1950s, an effort was made to restore the cemetery, by volunteers from the Riverside area. Progress was made, but the lack of a year-around caretaker left the way open to vandals.

Now the San Bernardino County Museum has placed a resident caretaker there.

No doubt there were others in South Colton who felt as did David Garcia — that the bell shouldn't have been taken from Colton.

But it has been in Riverside for over 100 years. It had spent its first 20 or more years in Agua Mansa, looking toward Riverside.