

Chapter 1

An Old Mission

MARY and Ronnie Alberts bent over the road map as the car sped north along the broad highway.

“That’s the place where we camped last night,” Ronnie said, pointing on the map to the little green tree that marked the beach state park. “And we’ve been on Highway 101 almost ever since we left the campground.”

Mary frowned as she traced the highway with her finger. “Daddy said we would stop at one of the California missions. We’ve gone through San Luis Obispo and San Miguel without stopping to see their missions. Are there any more?”

“Let’s see,” said Ronnie. “We went past Salinas a few miles back. Yes, here’s another little red bell. It’s San Juan Bautista. Daddy -” He waited for daddy and mother to stop talking. “Are we going to stop at San Juan Bautista? You promised that we could go through a mission today.”

Daddy smiled. “You guessed it, son. I’ve heard that there are some other historical exhibits at San Juan Bautista. I thought that if we stopped there we could see those as well as a mission.”

“Oh, goody,” said Mary. “We are getting to see almost as many things on this trip as we did last summer when we went to grandma’s. Isn’t it fun that we have been able to go to grandma’s two years in a row? I hope we can go again next year, too.”

Ronnie was watching ahead as far as he could see. He knew from the map that they would need to turn off on a side road soon to get to San Juan Bautista, and he wanted to be the first one to see the road sign. “I see the place, daddy! Look, isn’t that the road? There’s even a picture of the mission.”

“That’s the place, Ronnie.” Daddy turned to the right and they drove past farms and orchards to the little town of San Juan Bautista. They drove slowly along the shady streets, enjoying the large trees that stood in front of the old buildings.

“This really is an old town,” mother said.

“When was this mission built?” Ronnie asked as daddy parked across the street from the old adobe building.

“That’s part of what we will find out,” mother said.

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They went into the cool, dark building. A woman sitting at a small table gave them each a printed folder that told about the mission.

"See how the floor is worn," Mary whispered to Ronnie. "Look, the folder says the mission was founded in 1797."

They went into a part of the building that was now the museum. Ronnie was especially interested in some of the old farm tools. Mary stopped longest before the embroidered robes that had been used in the mission church services many years ago. "The folder says these are 150 years old, mamma," she said. "And look at the old hymnbooks. What language are they in? I can't read what they say."

"I think they are written in Latin," mother said.

After they had looked at the old kitchen where the food for all the mission Indians was cooked, they went into the mission garden. Mary stopped in surprise. "Look!" she gasped, pointing. "A cannibal pot!"

Ronnie snickered. "Silly! There weren't any cannibals around here. I'll bet it was a soup kettle!"

"Nobody could ever eat that much soup!" declared Mary, for she didn't like soup too well herself. "If it isn't a cannibal kettle, what is it?"

Daddy stepped back into the building to ask the woman at the table. When he came out he was smiling. "It's a tallow pot," he explained. "This mission had large herds of cattle in the early days. They made tallow from the cattle fat. Much of the tallow was used for candles."

"Let's go into the church," said mother.

Mary tiptoed timidly into the church. She had never been in this kind of church before, with its burning candles, statues, and brightly-colored cloth coverings.

Ronnie had been reading what the leaflet said about the mission church. "That biggest statue up there in front is John the Baptist," he said softly. "That's who this mission is named after. Is that what the name San Juan Bautista means, daddy?"

Daddy nodded. "Yes, it means St. John the Baptist. The name is Spanish because the missionaries who founded the mission came from Spain. This was a Catholic mission and this church has been used ever since it was finished in 1812. This leaflet says it took nine years to build the church," he added as they stepped outside again into the bright sunlight.

"I can see why," said Ronnie. "Look how thick and high those adobe walls are! What a job!"

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"I think the missions were built without nails, coo," said daddy. "The Indians had to fit the beams together, and they sometimes tied them with leather thongs."

They went through the dark corridor where they had first come in, then past the front of the mission church to the edge of the hill beside the mission.

"I wonder where the cemetery is," said Ronnie. "The folder says it is here at this side of the church."

Two priests were examining a weak spot in the adobe wall of the church. One of them looked up when Ronnie spoke. He smiled at the children and came toward them.

"Could I answer some of your questions?" he asked.

"Why, yes, thank you," daddy said. "I think we do have a few questions."

Ronnie was puzzled. He didn't see any cemetery in the mission yard.

The priest smiled at him. "I heard you ask about the Indian cemetery. This is the cemetery right here in front of you, beyond the stone wall. The graves aren't marked any more. Over four thousand mission Indians were buried here. This was the largest of the California missions, and many Indians lived here in its early days."

Ronnie had studied a little about the California missions while he was still going to public school, so he knew that there were twenty-one of the missions. "Was this mission founded by Junipero Serra?" he asked the priest.

The priest shook his head. "No, this one was founded after Junipero Serra died. But he planned for all of the missions, and he founded nine of them himself. He wanted to have a chain of missions from San Diego to San Francisco, about a day's walk apart. They were to be connected by a road named El Camino Real after the Wise Men, the Kings of the East, who visited the baby Jesus. You can see a stretch of the original El Camino Real just over the edge of this little hill." He walked the few steps with them to where they could look down on the narrow dirt road.

"I can remember when the green iron mission bells marked the road that joined the missions," said daddy. "Highway 101 once followed the mission road."

"Not any more, though," said the priest. "You see very few bells now. The highway has been straightened out and made into a freeway."

"Was Junipero Serra a missionary?" Mary asked.

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“He was, indeed,” said the priest. “He was the first missionary to the California Indians. Would you like me to tell you something about him?”

Mary nodded. She sat down on the low stone wall to listen.

“Junipero Serra was born on the island of Mallorca off the Mediterranean coast of Spain, in the year 1713,” the priest began. “His parents were farmers, but as he wasn’t very strong when he was a young boy, they decided to send him to school instead of having him work much on the farm. The only schools in those days were the monastery schools, so that is where he went. He was such a good student that when he finished learning as much as he could at the monastery in his village, the teachers helped him go to another larger one. Finally he went to the large university on the island, and when he finished the university course he became a teacher there. He was famous as a scholar. But Serra had heard about the Indians in Mexico. Mexico belonged to Spain then, and Serra knew that often the Spanish conquerors hadn’t treated the Indians very well, and hadn’t tried to teach them of Christ. Even though he had become a famous teacher at the university, he wanted to leave and be a missionary to the Indians. When he was thirty-six years old, he at last had a chance to go. How long do you suppose it took him to sail from Spain to Mexico?” the priest asked Ronnie.

Ronnie thought a minute. “Maybe a month?”

The priest smiled and shook his head. “Ninety-nine days! And you can be sure that he and all the others on board were glad when the rough voyage was over, for they had run short of water and food. From the port of Vera Cruz, Serra walked the hundreds of miles to Mexico City. He stayed there for several months, but he was anxious to begin his work for the Indians. His first missionary work was among Indians in northern Mexico, but he most wanted to go to California. California was part of Mexico then, but it had hardly been explored, and no Mexicans had settled anywhere.

“Serra was fifty-six years old when he set foot in the country that is now the State of California. The first thing he did was to choose a site for Mission San Diego. He had an Indian boy with him who could speak Spanish and several Indian languages, and he had brought bells from Mexico for the missions. He hung one of the bells on a tree at the place where he hoped to build the mission. As soon as he was ready to have his first church service, he rang the bell. The Indians had never heard anything like this, so they came flocking in from as far away as

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they could hear the bells. With the help of the Indian translator, Serra had a church service for them.”

Mary laughed. “I wonder what the Indians thought the bell was.”

“I’ve wondered that, too,” said the priest. “The Indians everywhere seemed to like the bells, and Serra made sure that each mission he founded had at least one bell. The Indians liked music, too, and he taught them many hymns. Many of the missions had choirs, and at least one had an orchestra.”

“Did Serra stay long at San Diego?” Ronnie asked. “Or did he just found the mission and then go on to start another?”

“He left the mission in charge of other missionaries who had come with him,” explained the priest, “and then walked north along the coast of California. Eventually he made his headquarters at the mission that is now called Carmel, near the Mexican capital of California at Monterey. Have you seen Monterey, the first capital of this state?” he asked Mary and Ronnie.

Ronnie shook his head.

“A beautiful town. You must visit it someday. Anyway, Junipero Serra lived at the Carmel mission for the rest of his life, visiting the other missions often, of course. When he died there were thousands of Indians living at the different missions, learning farming, carpentry, and other kinds of work. Many of them had become Christians, and that was what made Serra happiest of all.”

Mary and Ronnie thanked the priest for the story of Junipero Serra. Then they walked across the grassy plaza to some of the old buildings that had been built when San Juan Bautista was an important town on the stagecoach route.

“Daddy,” Mary said thoughtfully, “Junipero Serra was a Catholic missionary, wasn’t he?” “Yes,” said daddy.

“Didn’t any other churches send missionaries to the Indians?” Mary asked.

“I don’t think there were missionaries to the California Indians from any other churches,” daddy answered slowly. “But in New England there were other missionaries. I’ll tell you what. Let’s look at all the stagecoaches and old buildings here, and eat our lunch on the grass in the plaza. Then when we start on our way again, maybe mamma can tell you about other missionaries to the Indians. You know mamma is from New England.” He winked at mother.

“Oh, goody,” said Mary. “I like to have mamma tell stories.”