

Examining California's First Palm Tree: The Serra Palm

By

Heidi Trent and Joey Seymour

'Serra Palm, which dominates the scene at the beautiful "Kings Garden," acknowledged by all historians to be the oldest tree in California known to have been planted by human hands, stimulates fancy to an extent equaled by few other landmarks on this coast.

Winifred Davidson, March 1944.¹

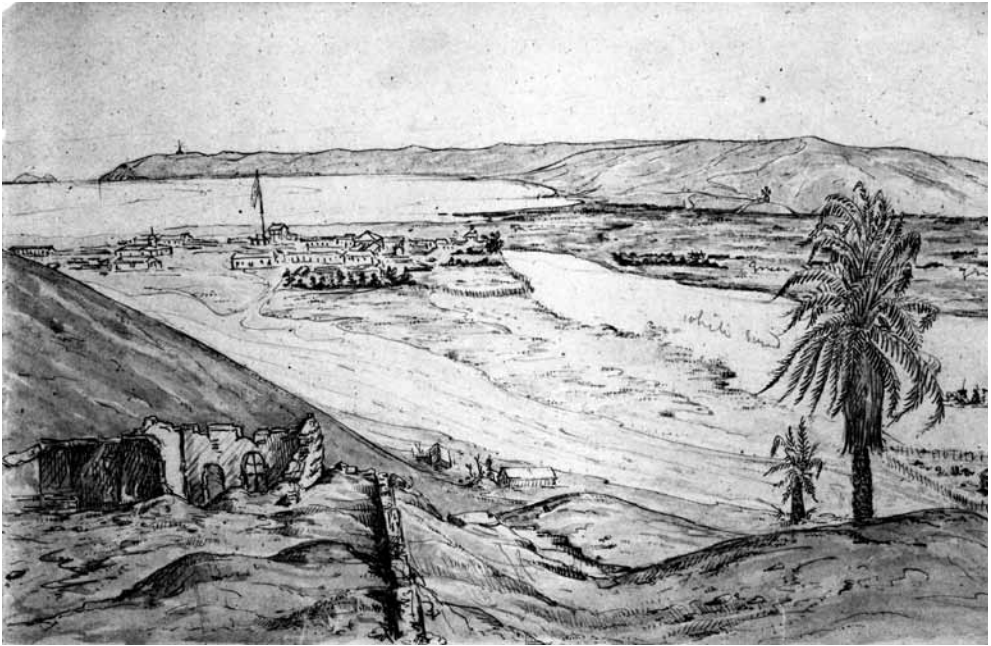


William Birch McMurtrie on the U.S. Steamer Active, 1858 painted by James Madison Alden. Photo courtesy of NOAA Photo Library.

A misplaced item in the folder labeled "Pigeon Point Lighthouse" at the Bancroft Library, has sparked a renewed interest in a nearly forgotten San Diego landmark—the Serra Palm. In 1987 San Diego anthropologist Ron May had been reviewing materials in the Lighthouse file when he came across a unique sketch detailing the ruins of the Spanish presidio in San Diego. According to May, "The view is to the southwest. Over near what we now call Midway, is the Dutch windmill that I later identified as erected in 1856 to mill flour for dry farming up on Point Loma. The Point Loma Light House is also in the sketch, which dated about three years earlier."² In the foreground of the sketch is a very detailed palm tree. While this specific tree does not depict the famed Serra Palm, the discovery of the drawing by William Birch McMurtrie, an artist

Heidi Trent, Sonoma State University alumnus and current candidate for the Master of Arts degree in history at University of San Diego, most recently assisted with the reopening of the Serra Museum in Presidio Park. She is currently working on her Master's thesis on California State Parks.

Joey Seymour, author of *San Diego's Finest Athletes*, University of San Diego alumnus, and part of the team that reopened the Serra Museum, wishes to thank Dr. Iris Engstrand and the San Diego History Center for the opportunity to work on this fascinating project as well as Carolina Colburn who assisted in the research and selection of the photos contained within this article.



Sketch (see cover) by William McMurtrie, ca. 1856. Photo courtesy of the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.

assigned to sketch comprehensive views that could be utilized in survey charts in the mid-1800s, has invigorated a curiosity regarding the old tree.³ In February 2010, while preparing to reopen the Serra Museum to the public, a color version (the cover of this journal) was found in a dusty drawer. It is due to these remarkable finds that this article has come to fruition and through its words and photographs, examines the historical accounts of the Serra Palm, which, after a supposed life span of 188 years, was cut down in 1957.

In July 1769, Spanish missionaries and soldiers congregated on the site that would become known as Presidio Hill. In years to come, mystery and mythology would shroud the factual details and stories of those who founded the first European settlement in Alta California. One of those mysteries pertains to the Serra Palm, which was one of two Old Town Palms or Mission Palms as they were sometimes known. Ellen Saunders, in 1953, wrote, "California's first Thanksgiving service was held July 1, 1769, in a Southland park; and during the ceremony the Golden State's first palm tree was planted."⁴ Controversy surrounds not only the notion that Father Junípero Serra was the one to plant the trees, but whether he in fact was present for the planting.

The lore of the Serra Palm began in 1769 with the reunion of the four branches of an expedition to Alta California organized by José de Galvez. "By the late eighteenth century ... the threat of Russian expansion south from Alaska, an increase in funds from Spain, and the zeal of Serra's missionaries combined to spark" a renewed interest in the lands north of Baja California.⁵ Sent overland and by sea to unite in San Diego during the summer of 1769, the military aspect of the expedition was led by Gaspar de Portolá and the religious arm by the Franciscan Father Junípero Serra. It is believed that as an act of celebration and thanksgiving for the safe reunion of the four groups, a blessing was offered on the site that is now Presi-



Old Palm sent to Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893. ©SDHC OP #12423-1379.

dio Hill.⁶ “The planting of two palms followed, the trees coming from dates Fr. Serra had brought from... [the] village of Loreto in Baja California.”⁷ Whether the famous palms were planted by Father Serra’s own hands or were accidentally dropped by a Spanish soldier may never be known. Nonetheless, the Serra Palm represents a symbol of the Spanish period in California.

By 1893, numerous palms stood at the foot of Presidio Hill and the site of the Serra Palm. During early 1893, one of these palms was moved to Chicago by rail for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Organizers hoped the palm would be a perfect addition to the San Diego display. This particular tree was uprooted about a quarter of a mile from the site of the Serra Palm and even though considered by some to be the third of the Old Town Palms, was never actually one of them. Robert C.

Bancroft, who witnessed the removal of the palm, described the process in an article from the *San Diego Union* dated March 1932, “I was present, on the spot, when the palm was moved... it was loaded on rollers and taken to the track at Old Town, where it was placed on two Santa Fe flat cars and transferred to the main tracks near the station downtown, on India street.”⁸ Bancroft goes on to claim, “Five years ago I met a man who had visited the horticultural gardens in Jackson Park, Chicago, and who told me that the San Diego palm was still living.”⁹ Despite this statement, it is believed that the palm did not survive the length of the Exposition.¹⁰ Notwithstanding, the risky feat of moving a full grown palm tree from sunny San Diego to windy, cold Chicago has only added to the folklore of the Old Town Palms.

In 1915, a fierce wind-storm crippled the cow pasture that had developed around the Old



Old Town Palms surrounded by the Palm Dairy, 1910. ©SDHC #4708-2.



Horse and buggy with passengers in front of Old Town Palms, 1905. ©SDHC #1905 3925.

Town Palms and caused the smaller of the two to break apart. As Ellen Saunders noted, "For many years these trees were among San Diego's most revered landmarks. When high winds in 1915 caused one of the Serra Palms to break, the public demanded that steps be taken to protect the remaining one."¹¹ That remaining tree would become known as simply the Serra Palm after this unfortunate wrath of Mother Nature.

By the mid-twentieth century, the Serra Palm, which was claimed to be over 150 years old, was being physically damaged by all manners of weather, animals, and humans. As early as 1869, concerned citizens of San Diego wanted to construct a protective fencing around the palms to guard them from being "bruised by runaways ... and burnt and chipped by



Old Town Palms as early 20th century technology develops around them. ©SDHC OP #5973.



Old Town Palms protected by original fencing built in 1887. ©SDHC #4135-A.

vagabonds.”¹² On March 20, 1887, a protective fence was built. In 1929, a donation by Mrs. Winifred Murtha made it possible for the fencing that had been placed around the Serra Cross in 1913 to be moved to protect the lone Serra Palm. Despite the shielding provided by the fence, the palm tree still suffered damage caused by severe weather, in particular high winds. In 1941 cables were installed to help stabilize the aging palm.¹³

On September 2, 1950, city officials and enthusiastic crowds gathered for a ceremony



After the loss of one of the Old Palms in 1915, the lone standing tree was dubbed Serra Palm at this ceremony in 1917. ©SDHC #80: 8544.



First historical marker indicating significance of the Serra Palm, 1917. ©SDHC OP #419.

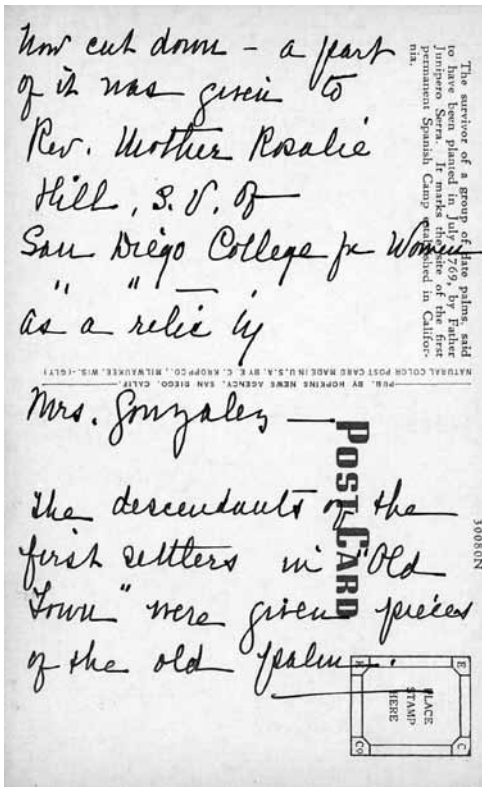


San Diego History Center

Serra Palm with Serra Museum in the background. ©SDHC #80: 8721.



Serra Palm postcard (front). Photo courtesy University of San Diego, Copley Library archives.



Serra Palm postcard (reverse). Photo courtesy University of San Diego, Copley Library archives.

to honor the Serra Palm as well as those who died during the expedition that brought California's first European settlers to San Diego. The plaque, which is still in place, reads "Serra Palm: Traditionally the earliest planted tree in California. Directly in the rear, beneath the brow of the hill, lie the dead of the sacred expedition of 1769. Burial place of our first unknown soldiers."¹⁴

The remaining tree stood over 80-feet tall. It was suffering from malnutrition caused mainly by lead poisoning. The lead caused the crown of the Serra Palm to tilt severely. From 1941 to 1957, there were several attempts to save the Serra Palm. According to a *San Diego Union* article dated September 23, 1952, "A Spanish musket ball at least 100 years old has been dug from the trunk of San Diego's famous Father Serra Palm."¹⁵ Upon further examination in 1957, six .44 caliber bullets were also found embedded in the old tree. Albert V. Mayrhofer, president of the California State Historical Association, stated his extreme displeasure at how the

Old Town Palms had been treated, "The historic trees were shamefully neglected and abused for many years. They were gnawed by disrespectful horses, and fell victim to those thoughtless vandals who, for some inscrutable reason, never miss an opportunity to carve their own unimportant initials upon everything which the public is having preserved."¹⁶

The day arrived, June 6, 1957. At 9 a.m. John Nicholson, an employee of a local tree service firm, climbed to the peak of the once majestic Serra Palm, and according to the *San Diego Tribune*, "sawed through it with a curved crosscut saw, dropping the top section inside the heavy guy wires that had supported the tree for several years."¹⁷ The tree was cut in ten-foot sections and by 10:15 a.m., the last of the Old Palms, the one affectionately known as the Serra Palm, was no more. Parts



A child looks down onto Taylor Street with Serra Palm and dairy farm below. ©SDHC OP #3875-8.



Efforts to save the Serra Palm take place, 1952. ©SDHC #S-3037.



John Nicholson climbs to the crown of Serra Palm to begin cutting it down, 1957. ©SDHC #S-3037.



Serra Palm loses its crown, 1957. ©SDHC UT #84_30258.9.



A commemorative plaque is placed on the site where the Serra Palm once stood, 1957. ©SDHC UT #84: 30258.10.



Early marker noting location of Serra Palm and indicating Serra Museum and Old Town, 1957. ©SDHC #S-3037-2.



Plaque still in place honoring the Serra Palm site on the corner of Taylor Street and Presidio Drive.
Photo by Iris Engstrand.



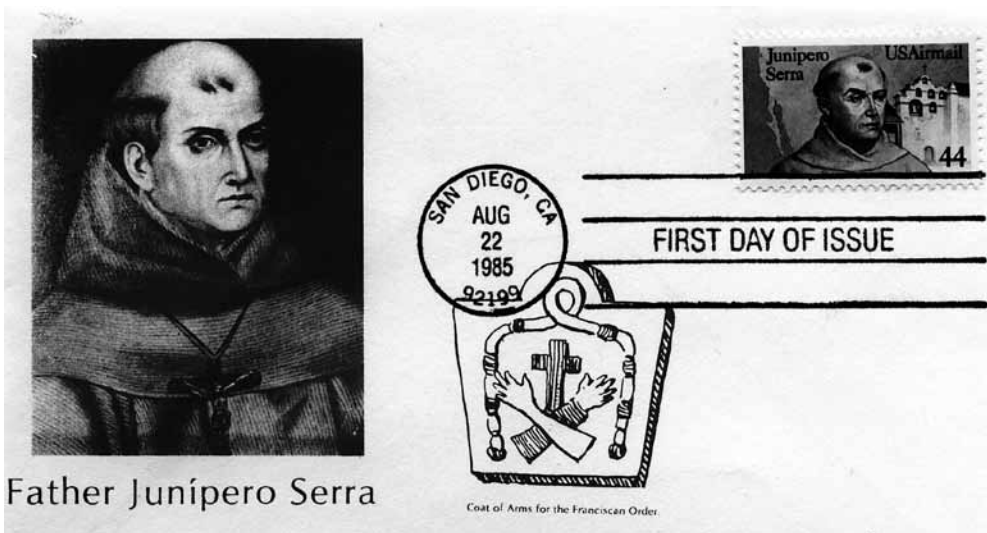
State Registered Landmark No. 67 marking the site of the Serra Palm by the California Centennial Commission,
September 2, 1950. Photo by Iris Engstrand.

of the tree were sent to local historical societies as well as to Balboa Park. Mother Rosalie Hill, founder of the San Diego College for Women, which merged with the College for Men to become the University of San Diego in 1972, was awarded a piece of the tree. Another notable recipient of a piece of the Serra Palm was the Serra Museum in Petra on the island of Mallorca in Spain, Serra's birthplace.

In October 1972, Jerry MacMullen, former director of the Serra Museum, discussing the rapid growth of the Serra Palm from 1887 to 1957 noted, "When time—and those slobbs with rifles – finally took care of the lone surviving tree a mere 10 or 15 years ago, it was at least twice as high as the ones in the photo of 1887, which brings up a disturbing question. From 1769 to 1887 is 118 years. Would a palm tree grow slowly for 118 years – and then sprout up like nobody's business in the remaining 70-odd years of its life?"¹⁸ While the tree's rapid growth in such a short span is an anomaly, MacMullen is actually questioning the legitimacy of the tree's tie to Father Serra and the Spanish settlers. This is fair, due to the fact that in 1944 *San Diego Union* columnist Winifred Davidson noted that the Serra Palm was a date palm with the scientific name of *Phoenix dactylifera*, although some people believe that the Serra Palm was actually a *Phoenix canariensis* (Canary Island date palm).¹⁹

The tree which Davidson identified as the Serra Palm can live as long as 200 years and is considered a medium sized palm tree. The Canary Island date palm has also been known to live up to 200 years (which still raises doubts), but is a much larger and solitary tree. Also, the voyage that brought Father Serra to Mexico (New Spain) and California in the mid-1700s, stopped for water and supplies in the Spanish controlled Canary Islands.²⁰ A final discrepancy is that the date palm produces a sweet, juicy fruit, whereas the Canary Island date palm's fruit is essentially inedible. This fact was noted of the Serra Palm.²¹

Whether or not Junípero Serra or one of his fellow travelers planted the famed Serra Palm will remain unknown. What can be believed is that the Serra Palm represented what is most likely one of the oldest and first palm trees to be planted in California as well as a link to our Spanish past, significant historical elements of not only California's history, but also United States history.



Serra commemorative stamp issued August 1985. University of San Diego Archives.

NOTES

1. Winifred Davidson's Personal Notes. San Diego History Center Archives. March 1944.
2. Ron May e-mail to Dr. Iris Engstrand, February 26, 2010.
3. See Neva Sullaway, ed., "William Birch McMurtrie 1816-1872: Artist/Draftsman of the Coast Survey," *Mains'l Haul: A Journal of Pacific Maritime History* 42 (Spring/Summer 2006) 22. The sketch may have been colorized by James Madison Alden, an artist who accompanied McMurtrie.
4. Ellen Saunders, "A Living Monument Was Planted at Service Marking California's First Thanksgiving," *Long Beach Press Telegram*, November 1952.
5. Iris H. W. Engstrand, *Serra's San Diego: Father Junípero Serra and California's Beginnings* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1982), 6.
6. Saunders, "A Living Monument Was Planted at Service Marking California's First Thanksgiving."
7. Ibid.
8. Winifred Davidson, "Bancroft Tells How Date Palm Went to Chicago," *San Diego Union*, March 14, 1932.
9. Ibid.
10. Jerry MacMullen, "San Diego Palm Met Its Doom In Chicago," *San Diego Evening Tribune*, October 29, 1972.
11. Saunders, "A Living Monument Was Planted at Service Marking California's First Thanksgiving."
12. Davidson's Personal Notes.
13. Harold Osbourne, "Majestic 166-Year-Old Mission Palms Need Care, Says Mayrhofer," *San Diego Tribune*, Sunday, February 20, 1941.
14. Serra Palm Marker on the corner of Taylor Street and Presidio Drive in San Diego, California.
15. "Ancient Spanish Musket Ball Found in Father Serra Palm," *San Diego Union*, September 23, 1952.
16. Osbourne, "Majestic 166-Year-Old Mission Palms Need Care, Says Mayrhofer."
17. "Serra Palm Falls to Woodman's Ax," *San Diego Tribune*, June 6, 1957.
18. MacMullen, "San Diego Palm Met Its Doom In Chicago."
19. The palms were likely *Phoenix dactylifera* (date palm) because of the small diameter of the trunk and more sparse canopy. It is difficult to tell with complete accuracy because the color would definitely help to separate the two species. Based upon the growth rates of other palm species, both could have a life spanning nearly 200 years.
20. Roy Tuck, "History of the Canary Island Date Palm in California," <http://www.sunsetpalms.net/information.php?go=4> (accessed June 17, 2010).
21. Letter from Winifred Davidson to Mr. R. Waite of San Quentin, CA, February 22, 1934.