

VF: North Beach

Early Mexicans Shaped City

By Matthew Brady

"Little Mexico" was the name given to the community centered in the small district bounded by Broadway, Vallejo, Du Pont (Grant) and Kearny streets from the early 1800s to the start of the Korean War. Two alleys, Hinckley and Pinkney, divided the village into four smaller blocks.

The most famous citizen of the early Beach was Juana Briones, who in the 1830s lived on a small farm on what we now know as Washington Square. A small stream flowed past her home, down the hill to a lagoon that was situated where Mason and Chestnut streets meet today. Señora Briones sold milk and eggs to Vioget's saloon, the unofficial city hall and the hub of social activity.

Life was always a struggle for the Mexicans living at the base of Telegraph Hill; unlike the Italians, they did not own property there. They lived in an array of wooden buildings flush with the narrow streets. Balconies and inner courtyards gave their homes an old-world touch.

All businesses in the village were Mexican, enhancing the cultural life of the inhabitants. There was a tamale factory, several saloons, an eating house, a provision store and two bakeries, one of which turned out tortillas, a staple of Mexican life.

A woman who made tortillas would leave her home at 3 o'clock in the morning and walk to the bakery. From the shelves in the basement she would take down a *metate*, a rough black stone from the beaches of Mexico hewn into a slanting oblong shape 12 by 14 inches. Then she would take another stone in both hands to grind the *nis'amel*, or corn, into fine paste on the *metate*.

She patted this paste into circular cakes six inches in diameter, put them on an iron sheet called a *comal* and cooked them over hot coals on a stand encased with brick. The piles of tortillas were rushed to stores and homes to be sold five for a nickel.

Another staple of Little Mexico was a special bread. The dough was kneaded and formed into small round loaves which were pushed through the oven aperture after the coals were removed.

On the second floor of the tamale factory, an old man spent his day at a table, spreading corn paste on corn husks.

The provision store was really a general store; beside the produce and canned goods on its shelves was a collection of pottery imported from the mother country. This earthenware was essential in the preparation of Mexican food. Small figures made of cloth, called images, represented members of the working class. The clay statuettes of soldiers and prominent people were often grotesque -- a form of Mexican satire.

La Lluvia de Ora, Restaurante Mexicano, was reached by climbing stairs to the second floor. Inside were tables covered with brown patterned oilcloth. Mexican lithographs adorned the walls. In the courtyard at the back were chickens in coops and rabbits jumping about freely.

The sons and daughters of Old Mexico had their own church, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, at 908 Broadway, with services in Spanish. This wooden structure, built in 1875, was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire. When it was rebuilt in 1912, it was the first church in the country to be



DEXTER DONG

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe), located on the north side of the Broadway Tunnel, was once in the heart of Spanish-speaking San Francisco. Scaffolding is in place because volunteer parishioners are reconditioning the circular mosaic of Our Lady of Guadalupe and, above it, a mosaic of the dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit. Church pastor Father Martin Avila says the rotted wood around the large mosaic — installed in 1875 — is being replaced with redwood. He adds it's a three-month project.

Mex. Quarter

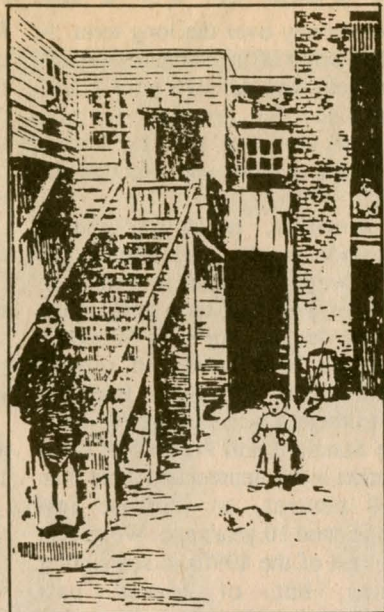
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constructed of reinforced concrete.

In the early days, there was some antagonism between the Mexicans and their Italian neighbors, so barber shops in North Beach provided separate chairs for each nationality. But all children rode the hobby horse that was often mounted on the third chair.

In his book, "Mining Camps: a Study in American Frontier Government" (Scribner's, 1884), Charles Howard Shinn writes that the government of San Francisco took its structure from that of the Mexican village. The alcalde, or mayor, was assisted in his decision-making by *regidores* and *syndicos*, which made up the *ayuntamiento*, comparable to our Board of Supervisors.

The Act of 1837 spelled out



Hinckley Alley in the Mexican Quarter in 1880.

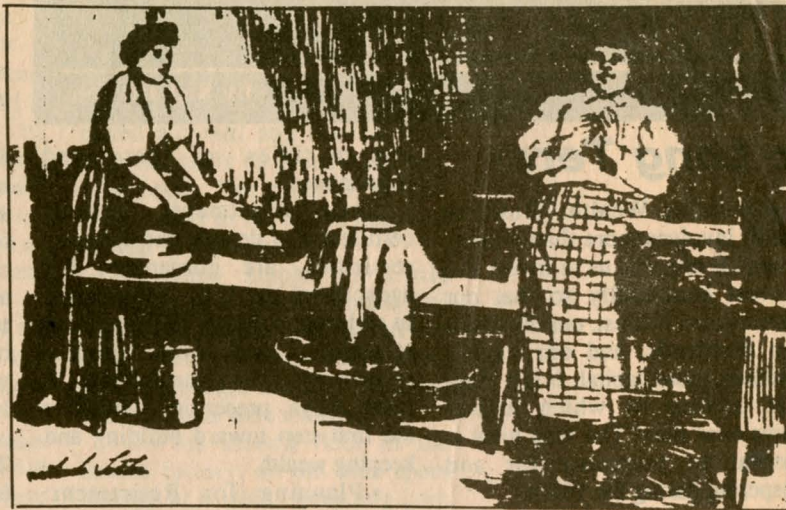
the duties of the *ayuntamiento*, among them, to be impartial to all

citizens, rich or poor; to open marketplaces; to maintain straight paved streets; to take charge of cemeteries, sanitary affairs, prisons and hospitals, and to establish schools, paying the teachers out of the municipal funds.

Our own *alcaldeship* goes back to 1833, when Jose Joaquín Estudillo was elected by the people of Mission Dolores to lead Yerba Buena. The last *alcalde* was J.W. Geary, elected in August 1849.

Shinn explains: "The office of mayor of San Francisco derived its historical descent, not from American and English sources, but from the semi-despotic rulers of Spanish pueblos, and the tributelevying governors of mediaeval (sic) towns of Castilian frontiers. The term (*alcalde*) survives; and San Francisco, metropolis of the Pacific Coast, still cherishes the title of 'ancient and honorable pueblo.'"

Happily, the Mexicans



Tortilla makers in 1880.

modified the harshness of the Spanish *alcaldeship*.

The Independent will soon publish "The Old Town: Real Life in Early Frisco," a selection of Matthew

Brady's columns from our pages, with original drawings by Patricia Kriegler Dols. These tales are recovered San Francisco history from the period before the turn of the century.