

Preserve and Protect

The Carmel Mission Foundation undertakes a big restoration project to help continue a legacy.

By Pam Marino

Craftsman Henry John Downie, “Harry” to all who knew him, was supposed to only stick around the Monterey Peninsula for a few weeks in 1931 to repair some statues at San Carlos Church in Monterey. After fixing what he could there, he headed to Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel, where found a wealth of projects that interested him. He stayed 50 years as the mission’s chief restoration expert.

Over the years Downie lovingly repaired and restored the Carmel Mission and its gardens piece by piece using original materials. A 2004 *Southern California Quarterly* article by Celeste Pagliarulo chronicles his efforts, calling the Carmel Mission “the most perfectly restored of the missions of Alta California. Downie successfully recaptured the past.”

In an undated audio recording of a talk a retired Downie gave inside the Carmel Mission Basilica that he worked to restore, along with other areas of the 22-acre complex between 1931 and 1967, an audience member can be heard asking if he had any new restoration projects he was working on. “I’m going to restore myself!” Downie

says, prompting audience laughter.

Downie died in 1980 and is buried in the Carmel Mission cemetery in a grave graced with abalone shells, like those he placed on the graves of the Indigenous people buried nearby. Not far from his grave construction workers are now busy retrofitting and restoring the 102-year-old adobe building, originally used as quarters for visiting priests and more recently as a museum named in Downie’s honor.

“I’m going to restore myself!”

The nonprofit Carmel Mission Foundation recently raised 90 percent of the \$4 million needed for the Downie Museum and Basilica Forecourt Restoration Project. Almost a month after a groundbreaking on April 5, the forecourt was torn out and the adobe building was hemmed in by wooden supports in preparation for earthquake retrofitting that will see thick steel rods placed inside holes drilled into the adobe brick walls.

As much as possible is done by hand to protect the aging buildings from



Stephanie Zelei, executive director of the Carmel Mission Foundation, seen outside the original entrance to the mission. The aging courtyard with drainage issues was demolished to make way for a new one as part of a larger \$4 million restoration.

mechanical vibrations. The goal is to finish the project by the 250th anniversary of the mission this fall.

As a small backhoe is at work digging near the adobe on April 30, Stephanie Zelei, the foundation’s executive director, details how the 1,157-square-foot building was the first rebuilt from the mission ruins, commissioned by Father Ramón Mestres, made famous by John Steinbeck in *Tortilla Flat*. It was constructed on the original footings of mission founder Father Junipero Serra’s second church, built to the right of the larger stone basilica. Inside is a stone fireplace designed by artist Jo Mora. It was dedicated as a museum the same year Downie died, showcasing many of the artifacts its namesake himself helped uncover during restoration in the 1930s.

Downie, Pagliarulo wrote, was an industrious craftsman but didn’t always log all of his work. He sometimes would walk into a room to fix one thing and wind up renovating the entire room before moving onto the next

project that caught his attention.

Zelei says Downie made extensive recordings that, along with historical photographs, provide today’s restorers clues to guide them in their work.

Downie himself was known to copiously study journals and records dating back to the founding of the mission to learn how things were built and what materials were used. He spoke to old-timers in the area, including descendants of the Indigenous people coerced into the mission system by the Spanish padres and soldiers.

His interest in the California missions ran deep, starting when he was a child growing up in San Francisco near Mission Dolores, according to Pagliarulo. He was baptized there a month after he was born in 1903. As he grew he could be found inside mission grounds weeding, repairing statues and doing something decades before most California fourth-graders were required to do: building models of missions. One of the Downie Museum artifacts is a model he built as a 12-year-old. ★

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