

UC SANTA BARBARA

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SHIP'S PAPERS DOCUMENT EARLY SANTA BARBARA LIFE

Bulk chocolate, copper skillets, white beaver hats,

stylish gold ribbon, wines and spirits, guitars and their strings

These were a few of the favorite things of Spanish settlers in early Santa Barbara, according to "Documenting Everyday Life in Early Spanish California: The Santa Barbara Presidio Memorias y Facturas,"

a just-published book edited and researched by University of California, Santa Barbara Spanish professor Giorgio Perissinotto and a team of graduate students.

Working with the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, Perissinotto and his students translated requisition and invoice papers from 52 merchant ships that delivered goods to the remote outpost between 1779 and 1810.

The documents and their translations make up most of the book's 405 pages.

Perissinotto found the variety of shipped goods -- textiles, pharmaceuticals, food, tools, weapons -- surprising and enlightening.

From what the settlers bought, inferences can be made about how they lived.

"One very important part is the drugs, medicines and remedies we found," Perissinotto said.

"They give us an insight into the types of ailments that they had.

Clearly, a very common ailment was stomach problems; there are a quantity and variety of purgatives and also ointments."

Clothes and material purchased indicate a society concerned with appearances despite its frontier address.

"This place was really on the fringe of the civilized world," Perissinotto said.

"But there was still a surprising desire of people to look fashionable."

Indeed, there was -- as is further supported in Perissinotto's introduction in which he notes a gaffe committed by early governor Pablo Vicente de Sola on his inauguration day.

De Sola's observation that the assembled women and girls looked delightful in their "old-fashioned" dress is said to have offended all of Alta California.

There was also a desire to have the finest in food and drink.

Chocolate was shipped in blocks of about 50 pounds.

Barrels and bottles of alcoholic beverages were frequently listed on the shipping documents.

"There were considerable amounts of liquid amenities like wine and spirits listed," Perissinotto said. "And the wine was not just for mass."

Some of the research will help in the recreation of an authentic atmosphere at the presidio, Perissinotto said.

"Now we can conjecture what they hung on their walls, what they put on their floors, what their reading material was, what they planted in the garden," he said.

"A very stunning find was a very detailed description of what the (garrison) soldiers' uniforms looked like."

Some of the documents translated and examined in the six-year study were available here.

Others Perissinotto tracked down in Spain. Handwriting, spelling and use of now-obscure words posed challenges.

"We had to understand what they meant in Spanish and then find an equivalent word in English," Perissinotto said.

That was particularly difficult with regard to weight and measure units involved.

But at least one reader has found the efforts of Perissinotto's team to have been up to the task.

"It is a stunning achievement," wrote Dr. David J. Weber, a history professor at Southern Methodist University. "(It is) the best discussion of weights and measures I've seen in a book that will be consulted for generations."

"Documenting Everyday Life in Early Spanish California: The Santa Barbara Presidio Memorias y Facturas

1779-1810" (\$49.95) can be purchased at the Santa Barbara Presidio (123 E. Canon Perdido, S.B.), Chaucer's Books (3321 State St. S.B.) , the Book Den (11 E. Anapamu St. S.B.) and at the UC Santa Barbara campus bookstore.

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