

Reflections

about

LAURA/BRIDE POWERS

by

Her Daughter

Gwendolyn Powers Applegarth

1977

As the daughter of pioneers, Laura Bride Powers was imbued with a spirit of indomitable perseverance which was a heritage from her parents, Michael David Bride and Annie Roberts Bride. She was born in Virginia City, May 15, 1867 and from early childhood her individuality was marked. This was partly due to her intense blue eyes and head of curly red hair. She was an early companion to her father who used to take her on his knee after work in mine timbering to talk about the day's events in this exciting town. She was sensitive to beauty and color and one of her favorite recollections was of the many-colored rug in her home which she used to lie down on to admire. Weekends would often find her gazing at the green moss growing under a nearby sluice box, there being a dearth of trees and shrubbery in this barren area. Sometimes she would slip by her mother on Saturdays, and drop her best hat out the window to be picked up outside for a trip to town, displaying early the love of good style which characterized her life.

The enjoyable things of Virginia City ended tragically with the sudden death of Michael Bride from a heart attack at the age of 37. Laura was only ten when her young widowed mother moved back to San Francisco with her four children, blending their lives from this time on with the city Laura came to love and serve so well. At Lincoln Grammar School she stood well in her classes, showing an early interest in writing, but in the 8th grade a special opportunity came for her to enter a city-wide competition with an essay on "Intemperance and Tobacco". Her's was the prize winner for which she was

awarded ten silver dollars at a large school gathering. Family members were so proud of their winner that an aunt took her on a trip to Carmel as a reward. On that Sunday the grave of Fray Junipero Serra was open for all to see that his body had not been removed to Spain as had been charged. He still reposed at the foot of the altar in Carmel Mission.

Laura was awe-struck by the sight of Serra's old leg bones being raised to view while the tying scarf fell away into dust and from that time on she was a devotee of the "Founder of California", writing and working for his recognition the rest of her life. Following Girls' High School, Laura continued her higher education at San Jose Teachers' College, which she finished in two years, receiving her diploma a few days after her 18th birthday. There followed a short period of teaching in a rural school near Hollister where some of the boys were older than herself. They terrified her by bringing guns to school to shoot rabbits out the windows. After teaching briefly in San Francisco, Laura was married to William Henry Powers who was associated with a printing firm, and their marriage continued for thirty years until his death at the age of 52. Two daughters were born to the couple, Gwendolyn and Marguerite, but after the severe illness of both children, Marguerite died of spinal meningitis.

After the death of her daughter, Laura felt impelled to do something with her writing, so she sought permission to work among

the Bancroft archives which were housed on Valencia Street. Information gained here and her own investigations became The Missions of California, published in 1897 by the Doxie Press. In 1902, Historic Tales of the Old Missions, directed to children, was issued by the Walter N. Brunt Company. It was widely used in schools.

In 1903, Laura Bride, as she became familiarly known, decided to form an organization to further landmark preservation. She called together a group of leading San Franciscans to discuss the idea and the "California Historic Landmarks League" was the result. Joseph R. Knowland, chairman of the Landmarks Committee of the Native Sons of the Golden West, was named president of the new organization, while Laura Bride Powers carried on as secretary to handle correspondence and publicity. When William Randolph Hearst offered to open the Examiner columns for publicity and to act as trustee for funds raised, Laura Bride agreed to write all the publicity. \$13,000.00 was raised with which Sonoma Mission, Fort Ross and the Viscaino-Serra Landing Place were purchased. A remaining \$500.00 became the nucleus of funds which later secured the First Theatre in Monterey for the state. The Landmarks League also began the restoration of the roof of San Antonio Mission which was furthered by Joseph R. Knowland.

From the vantage point of a new home in Carmel, Laura exerted her influence to make Carmel Mission more of an active parish. In

this effort she had the cooperation of the distinguished artist, E. Charlton Fortune and the backing of Bishop Philip G. Scher. Her church was very dear to her. As a member of the Third Order of St. Francis and of the National Council of Catholic Women, she wrote and spoke frequently on matters of history and women's rights. It was during her residency in Carmel that she began to write Old Monterey, California's Adobe Capitol.

The idea of developing a museum of history in the Old Custom House had long intrigued Laura and now she began to lay plans for its accomplishment. With a small appropriation from Governor Young and backing from Mr. Knowland, she was able to bring about her dream. The Native Sons who had been meeting in the Custom House obligingly found another place to meet. Prominent old families of Spanish descent loaned their ancestral treasures for display while friends contributed money for cases to exhibit them. Finally, Laura moved into an improvised apartment at one end of the building so she could hose down the sidewalk and benches which tobacco-chewing fishermen made so unsightly. She was soon named custodian of this Number 1 State monument, over which she presided for ten years, eventually being named Supervisor of other State properties as well.

Seeing a need for an organization to promote an interest in Monterey's adobe landmarks, Laura Bride called together a group of prominent citizens to consider the proposition, and out of this beginning the Monterey History and Art Association was formed.

Among the enthusiastic planners was Col. Roger S. Fitch, Commanding Officer of the Presidio, who was chosen to act as the first president, a position he filled for fifteen years. This fledgling group now numbers over one thousand members and becomes more involved in Monterey's welfare every year. Soon Laura arranged to celebrate the Founding of Monterey on June 3rd by a "Merienda" or Spanish picnic. She suggested to the Jacks/sisters that their patio would be the ideal place for such a festivity and gave the name "Memory Garden" to the patio of the Pacific Building, where every year since then pageantry, music, toasts and beautiful table decorations have marked the Anniversary. A Laura Bride Powers Award is presented each year to someone who has contributed conspicuously during the year to the city's welfare. "La Favorita" who presides over the luncheon and who is always a young girl descendant of a pioneer Spanish family, cuts a large birthday cake with the shining sabre of the Presidio Comandante.

It is evident that Laura Bride was an idea person - as one suggestion after another was brought forth to stimulate action to preserve Monterey's historic tradition. The restoration of the First Theatre in California was accomplished under her supervision, and weekend melodramas which began when the theatre was re-opened have continued through the years to bring distinction to the city's entertainment.

When Laura reached the age of 70 it became necessary for her to resign from her Custom House position and she returned to San Francisco to live with her daughter, Mrs. George Adrian Applegarth, on Vallejo Street. A heart attack briefly slowed her down, but she soon turned her attention to San Francisco's own history needs, calling together a group to plan for a celebration of the city's birthday similar to Monterey's "Merienda". On June 29th, 1940, a buffet luncheon was held in the patio of the San Francisco Building on Treasure Island, during the Golden Gate International Exposition, with Miss Theresa Guilfoil acting as "La Favorita" as she joined the Commanding Officer of the Presidio in welcoming guests and in cutting the huge cake. This practice has continued ever since and is now celebrated at Mission Dolores and the Presidio from June 27-29th - a sold-out event each year. Mrs. George Applegarth and Mrs. J. Jerrold Applegarth have carried on with Dr. Alexander Leonard, and later with Dr. Albert Shumate, as co-chairmen to keep the Birthday celebration significant, colorful, and entertaining, with city dignitaries participating in appropriate remarks.

Laura Bride Powers' life activities were numerous and varied, She was a frequent contributor to newspapers and magazines on matters of historic interest or women's affairs in which she took leadership. She was a prolific writer of "Letters to the Editor" in San Francisco, Monterey and Santa Barbara where she had an art studio for a time. In Santa Barbara she wrote many articles to

raise money for the restoration of the Mission after the devastating Santa Barbara earthquake. At the time of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, Laura Bride was on the staff of the San Francisco Call Bulletin, doing Women's Page articles and art criticisms. On that April 18th, her "atmosphere" story of the opera Carmen appeared under the by-line of "Sally Sharp", written in the pre-dawn after Enrico Caruso's triumph the night before! Among San Francisco artists, Laura counted many good friends whose studios she frequented, especially Gottardo Piazzoni, Maynard Dixon (who designed her book and magazine covers), Charles Dickman, Xavier Martinez, Ralph Stackpole, Benjamino Buffano and others of that era. When Joseph Knowland bought the Oakland Tribune, he invited his good friend and co-worker Laura Bride Powers to take over Clubs, Society and Art on his new publication which he wanted to build up to a high standard. She remained on the Tribune staff for six years. As a worker in the Women's Suffrage campaign Laura wrote often for the official magazine, "Yellow Ribbon", and when women were granted the vote she took over the magazine as her own publication, calling it, "Western Woman". Unfortunately, it had a short and expensive life.

Laura Bride was a great wreath-placer. I like to recall the times the family made wreaths from our garden ivy to honor Junipero Serra or Robert Louis Stevenson by decorating their monuments in Golden Gate Park or Portsmouth Square. Laura would walk around to arouse people dozing on near-by benches, urging them to come and

hear what she would have to say about these distinguished men - much to the family's amusement. At the time of her death, January 15, 1947, she had finished about two-thirds of a book on Robert Louis Stevenson which she felt contained much new material.

Laura Bride Powers was considered a handsome woman, tall, of good carriage and much style, her white skin and auburn hair making her a subject for artists' sketches. She was a fine conversationalist, quick witted, friendly, and full of Irish humor - a true Californian.

In January, 1977, a bronze plaque honoring Laura Bride Powers and sponsored by the Monterey History and Art Association was placed on the wall of the Memory Garden where the "Merienda" is held each year. The legend reads:

In Memory of
Laura Bride Powers
Author and Civic Leader
Founder of the
Monterey History and Art Association
Old Custom House Museum and
Annual Merienda
Monterey History and Art Association

1976