

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

VOL. III. No. 3

SAN DIEGO, ALTA CALIFORNIA, MARCH 27, 2009

PRICE: FREE

Challenges Part II

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Construction on the Casa de Bandini most likely began the late spring, when the ground is moist. Anyone who has tried

to dig in dry soil in San Diego knows it can be as hard as a rock, which is why it makes good bricks. Taking advantage of the rain or retreated flooding would make it actually possible to dig. If the soil got too dry, water would need to be added. This may have been done by digging channels from the San Diego River to the plaza. Additional water would be needed in making mortar and mixing the bricks in any event.

Using shovels, the workers would dig a shallow pit often referred to as a "borrow pit" to mix the mud. One such pit was found during an archaeological dig in 1995 at the Estudillo, just off Calhoun Street.

Now, they will need two more tools, hoes, and machetes. The hoe is a very ancient tool, first being made of wood alone, then antler, bone and stone were added as blades. The development of copper, then bronze then iron and steel, greatly improved the tool, so they not only worked better, but lasted longer. Hoes in 1827 would be acquired the same places as the shovels, made by a blacksmith locally, or imported. The hoes are needed to mix the mud so it is consistent, and to blend in the chopped grass or straw. Chopping the grass or straw is where the machetes come into use. The machete, although used in even primitive cultures throughout the Americas, is a much newer tool than a hoe, as they require a metal, usually steel blade. Machetes were first spread over the world by the sea trade; the major centers of production were in Collinsville, Connecticut, USA and in England, and

Germany, although Spain is noted as well for metal work and fine blades.

After the mud is mixed it is shoved into wooden forms or molds. Although there are many types of adobe construction, the Spanish introduced wooden forms to the Americas. The forms used in 1827 usually made one or two bricks. (See Cosmopolitan Chronicles Vol. I # 18 and #19 for more on lumber and joinery). Usually the bricks are twice as long as they are wide, and there is no "standard" size. The forms used for the Casa de Bandini may have been left from the construction of the Mission, and/ or the Presidio.

Once the mud is packed into the forms, it has to dry a short while, depending on the weather, before the forms can be removed. After the forms are removed, the rows of bricks are dried in the sun. For even drying, the blocks have to be turned over every few days. Turning 50,000 bricks--weighing between 45 and 65 pounds--would take days.

