

My lesson in California history

BY MAXFIELD MORRIS

The real history of Spanish missions is not child's play

As a product of California public schools who created a model of a Spanish mission in fourth grade, I can testify to the very limited merit of the assignment, though I used Lego bricks instead of sugar cubes.



What stuck with me from the project was a sense that the missions were exciting places. It was like a miniature society where people played their parts to make each aspect in life run smoothly. The most conflicted I felt throughout the whole process was when I got jealous of friends that were doing reports on missions with more interesting architecture, or that had more exciting names than mine did.

Researching the era again gave me an entirely different perspective.

Times were different when Junipero Serra, the father of Spanish mission in California, was evangelizing. European settlers and indigenous Californians understandably had violent differences—but viewed by today's standards, the legacy of Serra is genocidal. If a modern person led a campaign to stifle thousands of years of native culture, forced indentured servitude and set the stage for policies of repression and assimilation, they certainly wouldn't be honored.

For me, Serra is on the list of folks California should keep in the history books and push off pedestals.

Sutter's Fort in Sacramento exists in that same, oddly sterile world of

scholastic positivity.

I never went on the ubiquitous pioneer field trip to the fort, though I briefly tagged along when my older brother did. My memories of it are largely positive: getting to see my sibling dress in a silly outfit, pretending electricity and zippers didn't exist and eating some apple pie and cornbread.

I find myself looking back and wondering if I just didn't pick up on the terrible details, or if they were simply glossed over. Maybe it's too difficult to accurately convey atrocities to kids, or too controversial.

It's shocking to see dubious historical figures still propped up in public places, bathed in neutral or positive lights and justified by arguments that times were different back then, or that compared to many other pioneers, John Sutter was a fairly decent guy. And besides, he's deeply entwined in the history of Sacramento and California.

Leaving up equivocal tributes to monsters is effectively the same as rewriting history. A romanticized sculpture of Christopher Columbus, no matter if it's a work of art, doesn't belong at the center of our state Capitol. And Sutter, who would be considered morally bankrupt by today's standards, can't be handled with kid-gloves.

If these figures are going keep their monuments, they should be presented as they lived—exploiting native Californians. □

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