

S. R. Nelson, A Rancho Santa Fe Pioneer

I have been asked to describe the experiences of my father, S. R. Nelson, who had a pioneer role in Rancho Santa Fe's development. I consider it a privilege to set down what I remember about someone who did so much to assure the unique character of the ranch, a character which is so highly prized today. But first let me be quite honest about this account; much of the factual information comes from "Rancho Santa Fe - Yesterday and Today", a book which my mother, Ruth Roberts Nelson, published in the late 1940s.

Sydney Robert Nelson, best known to friends and family as Syd, was born in Wisconsin in 1885. He came to San Diego County in 1903 accompanied by his mother, hoping to recover from tuberculosis in a mild dry climate. His convalescence was long and difficult, but it was complete by 1913, the year in which he married my mother.

At that time father was employed by the Spreckles Company in San Diego. Soon afterwards he began work for the H. N. Savage Company, a construction firm. While with them, he was involved with building an Army airfield on North Island at the edge of San Diego Bay, building a World War I Army training camp on Kearny mesa, and building Lower Otay, Barrett, and Henshaw dams for the City of San Diego.

The Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Santa Fe Railroad, best known to us as "the Company", began development work on the ranch in 1922 - completing surveys, laying out roads and pipe lines, and starting construction work in the village. Father joined the company staff as project accountant, quartered with other staff members in the old Osuna ranch house on Via de la Valle. Mother and I joined him on the ranch in July 1923 when family quarters became available in the village. Our family was the first to occupy the La Flecha House, now a historical landmark.

Father's responsibilities were soon expanded. Even before mother and I arrived on the ranch, he had been given the task of establishing a village school, a necessity for a family oriented development. He accomplished this through conferences with the San Diego County superintendent of schools and with the Fidero family, whose ranch adjoined Rancho Santa Fe's northerly boundary. As a result, what was then the Aliso elementary school

was moved from the Fidero ranch to a temporary location in the village. The school opened in the fall of 1923 with five pupils, of whom I was one. Father, Lillian Rice, and Mrs. Fidero served as the first trustees for what soon became the Rancho Santa Fe School District.

As initially offered, Rancho Santa Fe properties were subject to 10-year deed restrictions which gave the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company control over property use, architectural design, and cost and type of construction. Because sales had begun as early as 1922, the first of these restrictions were due to expire during 1932.

By 1925, father had become involved with property sales as well as accounting. He welcomed this new activity, something which he enjoyed and at which he excelled. He shared the vision of a carefully planned community development held by W. E. Hodges, Company head, and L. G. Sinnard, the project manager, a vision which became father's life-long goal. Though he saw the Company's deed restrictions as a means toward that goal, he felt that a term of only 10 years was inadequate protection for the type of home owners which the Company wished to attract.

Father became project manager in early 1927 after illness forced Sinnard's retirement. One of his first actions was to discuss the deed restriction problem with Mr. Hodges, who was equally concerned. Together, they sought for something that would guarantee owner protection in perpetuity. Charles Cheney, a nationally known city planner, provided the solution: restrictions which could be administered by the owners themselves through an association.

After conferences between Cheney, Mr. Hodges, and father and before 1927 ended, Briggs C. Keck, Barton Millard, Ranald Macdonald, A. H. Barlow, and father, all resident property owners, signed articles of incorporation establishing the Rancho Santa Fe association. As a next step, Cheney and father drafted a proposed protective covenant, copies of which were sent to all Rancho Santa Fe property owners, urging their acceptance and approval. In her book, mother, who always looked at the world through rose colored glasses, said: "a majority of these owners quickly signed the new agreements".

In reality, the covenant was not adopted so easily. A number of owners were reluctant to accept such binding controls, and the task of persuading them fell almost entirely in father's lap. This was one of father's greatest sales efforts, an effort whose success did much to determine Rancho Santa Fe's future.

After the covenant had been adopted, father served on the Association's first board of directors, then in 1932, after he had opened his own real estate and insurance office in the village, he was appointed as secretary of the Association and the art jury. He served in these capacities until he resigned in the 1950s, some twenty years later.

During his tenure, he made every effort to see that covenant provisions were carried out in what was both an effective and a reasonable manner. In much the fashion of a presidential oath, he was determined to protect the covenant and Rancho Santa Fe "against all enemies, foreign and domestic." He believed that without the covenant Rancho Santa Fe would sink into a slough of mediocrity – and this is just what would have happened.

By 1932, most but not all owners had placed their properties under the covenant. Because the ranch was not fully covered, father, acting for the Association, persuaded the San Diego County Board of Supervisors to adopt the county's first zoning ordinance. Mother wrote that "the ordinance was quickly applied to the Rancho Santa Fe area, safe guarding the weak spots left by (covenant) non-signers". Although county zoning was not as rigorous as the Covenant, it was sufficient to protect against the uncontrolled use catastrophes which have occurred all too often in California.

In its first sales promotions, the Company put forth the notion that avocado and citrus orchards could supplement retiree incomes. Before long, however, the thought of retiree recreation became more attractive than an agricultural potential which had never been all that great. In 1928, this led to the incorporation of the Rancho Santa Fe Country Club – father was a charter member. After borrowing money from the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, the club completed a golf course, then went broke when the stock market crashed in October 1929.

By agreement with the Company, the Association took over ownership and operating responsibility. Operating losses, which were

substantial, were met from Association membership assessments. While members who saw the golf course as an asset were grudgingly willing to meet this expense, a vocal minority objected strongly.

As Association secretary and, in effect, course manager, father was the first to hear the outcries of the disgruntled members. Arguments about golf course assessments were long, loud, and bitter – the ranch has always welcomed controversies. However, the course did survive, finally became self supporting, and eventually reverted to its original status as a private club. Father's efforts did much to keep the course alive through the difficult years of the 1930s.

At that time, however, the Matoon Act posed a far greater threat to the ranch than possible golf course abandonment. Again acting as Association secretary, father became deeply involved with the solution of a problem which could have destroyed any possibility of the Rancho Santa Fe which exists today.

California's Matoon Act, adopted in the 1920s, enabled unincorporated rural communities to establish districts which could finance street paving by issuing bonds. Rancho Santa Fe, which began street paving in 1929, formed one of the fifty seven such districts which were organized in San Diego County.

The Act made district property owners jointly liable for bond interest and principal payments. If any one owner became delinquent, his or her tax liability fell on the remaining owners. When the depression began, so many persons became delinquent that the tax burden on remaining owners became insupportable, forcing a general tax strike. The cloud which this placed on property titles stopped almost all property sales and real estate loans. Many owners, including more than just a few in Rancho Santa Fe, simply abandoned their property, leaving vacant homes, dying orchards, and desolate vacant lands.

By then, the Santa Fe Railroad had repossessed its Rancho Santa Fe holdings – these had been sold to a Pasadena land company in 1929. R. M. Clotfelter had succeeded father as the railroad's resident sales manager, and, as previously mentioned, father had opened his own real estate office in the village even though sales activity had almost completely halted.

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With railroad assistance, the Association negotiated a settlement with the bond holders, enabling Rancho Santa Fe's development to continue. Both father and Reg Clotfelter had a significant part in this rescue operation. When an agreement was finally reached, the ranch assembled in the village one evening for a ceremonial bond burning, conducted by Association officials to lift the Matoon Act curse.

Up to the time of his death in 1963, father, in his own quiet, tactfully persuasive way, fought to uphold the covenant standards which had given Rancho Santa Fe such a solid foundation. Always supported by mother, he never lost faith in Rancho Santa Fe, even in the depression's darkest days – and they were very dark indeed. His confidence was rewarded when the end of World War II brought the start of what rapidly became a California population explosion. From then on, Rancho Santa Fe's future was assured.

As the years passed, father began to assume the role of an elder statesman. He was known by all, liked by everyone, and widely respected for his sound advice concerning the conduct of ranch affairs. Together, father and mother were true Rancho Santa Fe pioneers. Nothing would please them more than to see the result of their efforts reflected in the Rancho Santa Fe of today.

Colonel Charles R. Nelson
Laredo, Texas
August 1995

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