

Pobladores
y
Californios



California Pioneers
of
Santa Clara County

Historical Essay Contest

1990

POBLADORES Y CALIFORNIOS

(Settlers and Natives of California)

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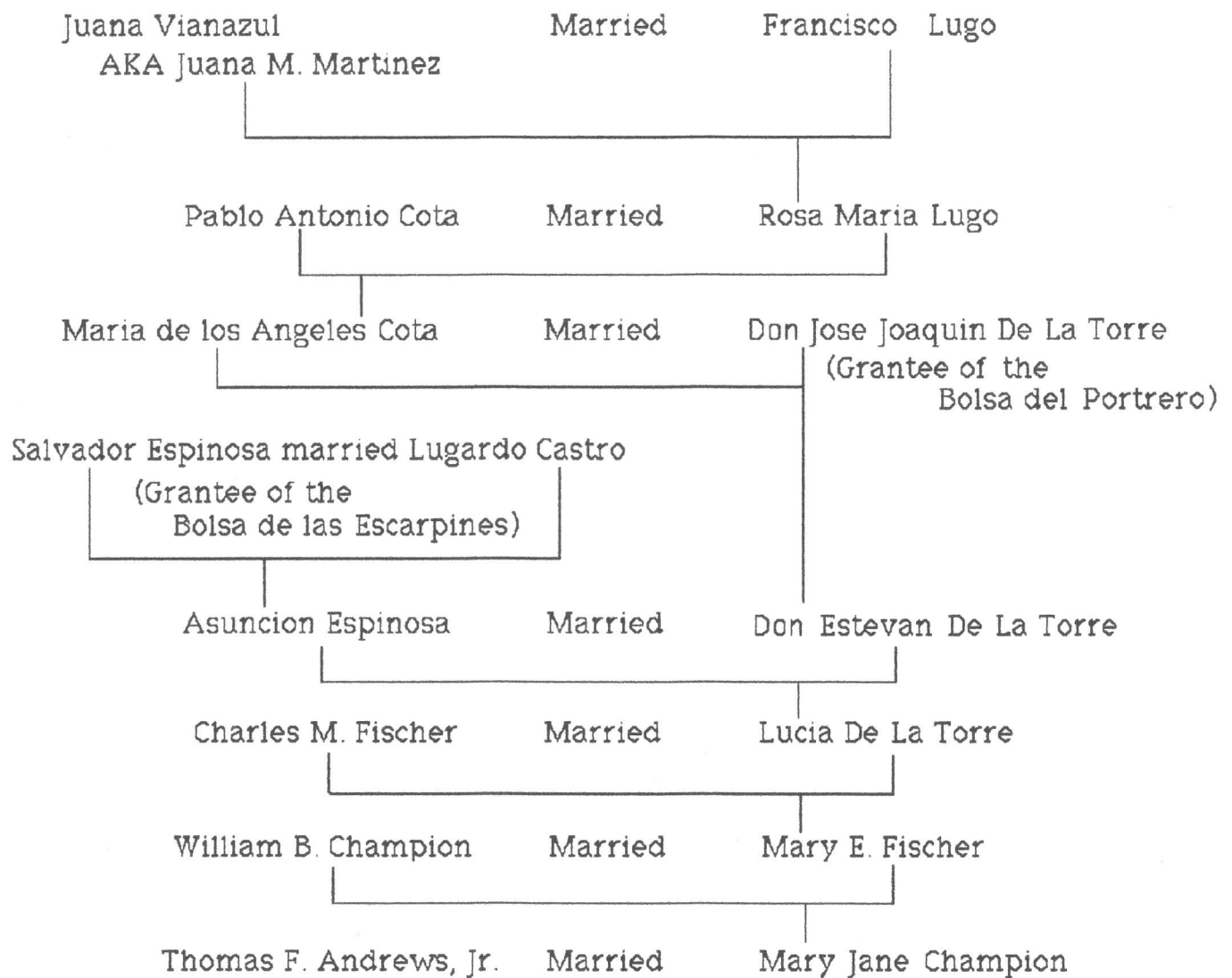
I had no idea that tracing my Spanish ancestry in California would become such a monumental feat. The more I read, the more fascinating it became. I am aware that whole stories could be written about each of the generations; that all of their lives are filled with their contributions to California History. I have tried to limit my effort to an attempt to preserve for my children, and their children the background of the proud heritage closest to them.

If I have accomplished this, I will have reached my goal. It will remain their task to keep reminding future generations that they are a part of the California Camelot.

Mary Jane Champion Andrews

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One Branch of the Family Tree



Pobladores y Californios

My earliest memory of my Grandmother, Lucia De La Torre Fisher is of a tiny, sparrow-like lady, walking spryly from Downtown, as I watched from the porch at her home at 420 North Sixth Street, in San Jose. She was a sweet, gentle lady who, her eyes sparkling, would pretend that she didn't see me, would call out my name, show surprise to discover me on the steps, and present me with the peppermint candies I had learned to love. I was four or five years old, and even at that age, I knew I was dearly loved. Our name for her was "Mamagrande", and I was always happy when we visited her. She told us stories, always had a treat for us, and never, never raised her voice.

As I grew older, and long after her death, the stories she told began to intrigue me, and after a course in California History at San Jose High School during my senior year I was captured. I began to listen more closely to the stories my mother told us about her ancestors, and to understand her pride when she went "through the chairs" in the San Jose Parlor of the Native Daughters of the Golden West. Her California heritage had begun generations before, and I began to feel the need to investigate my Hispanic ancestry.

The earliest records of California and it's conquest show that Juan Cabrillo visited Upper California in the year 1542-3, although Cortes is said to have brought some colonists to the newly discovered land during his voyage in 1535. Drake made his historic visit in 1579, and in 1602-3 Sebastian Vizcaino explored along the California coast.

My Spanish ancestors must have heard the tales of these early explorers for many generations, for at last an arrival has been noted in the New World of Andres Cota, whose mother's maiden name was Angela De Leon. (My mother always said that this lady was of the famous Ponce de Leon family.) Andre's son, Pablo Antonio Cota was born in 1744 in El Fuerte, Sonora, and was married on Nov. 30, 1776 to Rosa Maria Lugo in the San Louis Obispo Mission. Her father's name was Francisco Lugo y Espinosa. The original Espinosa was married to the daughter of King Phillip of Spain, a tangible line to the Royal House of Bourbon.

Francisco Lugo was a Mexican soldier who came with his family from Sinaloa soon after 1769, living in the Presidio at Los Angeles, and later at Santa Barbara Presidio. He died at Santa Barbara in 1805 and may be regarded as the founder of the Lugo family in California. One of his sons, was killed as a boy after being thrown from a horse, one became a Soldier at Santa Barbara, a daughter Tomasa, who married Captain Raimundo Carrillo, and Rosa, a daughter who married

Alfrez Cota. This couple had five children, one of whom married Ignacio Vallejo.

In 1774, the members of the first families, including the Cotas, the Espinosas, the Tapias, and the Lugos were recruited by a Captain Rivera to guard the Los Angeles Pueblo, and to blaze the trail for the coming of Father Junipero Serra. Some of these early settlers had been with the Anza and Portola expeditions, knew the area and its people, and became valuable soldiers of the "Motherland".

My Great Great Great Grandfather, Cayetano Espinosa came from Lower California and from Sinaloa by the Yuma Pass, and the shield he used in fighting the Yuma Indians is now in the Carmel Mission Museum.

Many other early Spanish family names have been added to my heritage, for there were many children and many marriages. We are linked by blood to the illustrious Castro family, the Tapias, the Vallejos, the Sepulvedas, the Carrillo family, and later, the Hartnell family.

Pablo Cota and his wife bring the family closest to me, for their daughter Maria de Los Angeles Cota, a cousin of Mariano Vallejo, was born August 21, 1791 in the Santa Barbara Presidio, and on August 3, 1803, she was married to Don Joaquin Jose De La Torre, who was my Great Great Grandfather.

Don Joaquin was born in Santander Spain, the son of

Melchor De La Torre. Family history reveals that Melchor had saved a member of the Spanish royal family from a burning tower, and that, in appreciation, the King had granted all descendants of the hero's bloodline the right to be addressed as Don, or in the case of women, Dona. This early De La Torre arrived in Monterey in 1801 as a member of the Military company stationed at the Presidio, was married to Maria De Los Angeles Cota on August 3rd 1803, and served there with his family until 1822. Under Mexican rule he was secretary of the equivalent of a state legislature from 1823-1825. In June, 1822 he was given a land grant consisting of 6915 acres near Salinas by Governor Sola. This land was the Bolsa del Potrero Rancho, and was granted to De La Torre for his over 21 years of service to the nation,---and incidentally, for his fathering 7 male children. In 1829 General Mariano Vallejo and his sister Encarnacion, convinced De La Torre to sell his rancho. Encarnacion had married John B .R. Cooper, and Cooper bought the ranch for the sum of 2,000.00 Dollars. It was Don Joaquin who insisted on the capitalizing of the De and La in his name, and it is said that only members of his family may use the capitalization in the spelling of the family name.

Although Don Joaquin and his wife had 11 children, only the sons were mentioned in the petition for the land grant. The fifth son, Estevan Antonio Pablo De La Torre was my great

grandfather. He was Born in 1818, his Godfather being Estevan Munras, who was a prominent Monterey merchant. As reported in Bancroft's "History of California", Estevan was field judge for the annual cattle round-up in Monterey. "He never had much to do with politics, but was a hard working, industrious rancher". He was, however, a member of the town council in 1844. Estevan married Asuncion Espinosa and moved with her to 1300 acres of the Rancho Bolsa de las Escarpines, which was her dowry. His father-in law, Salvador Espinosa, was grantee and claimant of a large land grant, and as a result, each of Espinosa's children received a large parcel of land on their marriage. It was on this ranch that Estevan, who preferred the peaceful pursuits of agriculture and commerce, and his family were in comfortable circumstances, enjoying the respect of all who knew them. In 1877, he dictated much material to Bancroft's secretary for a volume of 234 folio pages. This material is entitled "Reminiscencias" and is in the Bancroft's collection in the library at the University of California at Berkeley. Bancroft states that "this is an excellent contribution to my collection, and is particularly valuable as a picture of the manners and customs of the times, as well as a trustworthy record of public events passing under his observation." In these De La Torre also relates his experiences in the gold placers.

Estevan's sister Rita, was married to Florencio Serrano, and in an article in the Monterey Herald Feb. 28, 1957, we learned that the Adobe known as the Casa Serrano was their home in Monterey, and she was known to have a terrible temper. They were however, a happy couple raising a large family of sons and daughters, and Bancroft also mentions a manuscript dictated by Serrano which is also a valuable addition to his collection. His sister Maria is the only one recorded to have gone to live in Spain after marrying a Spanish captain, Mariano Silva. While in Spain, she discovered that he already had a wife and children. She worked her way to Mexico as a ship's cook, and in later years told her children that she was "like a slave without shoes". From Mexico she notified her family, and was sent funds to return to Monterey with an infant daughter, Eugenia. Later she was married to Vincente Feliz.

Estevan and Asuncion had seven children, one of whom was Lucia De La Torre, my grandmother. Her childhood on the Rancho was typical of the times; she was tutored in the finer skills of homemaking as the prospective wife of a Spanish Don. She was never exposed to the routine daily duties of household life, leaving these mundane chores and hard work to the servants of the household. Her every want and need were heeded by servants. Indeed, a little Indian girl, a foundling named La Chepa, was kept in the home for the sole purpose of

keeping Lucia's feet warm. My sister Beatrice, once asked my mother if La Chepa was paid for her services. My mother's answer was "Of course not, none of the servants were paid, they had everything they needed, they had no need for money!" We know now that they were in reality, slaves. My grandmother's embroidery and other stitchery were of the finest, and her exposure to life outside the Rancho was limited to church functions and family gatherings, always supervised by her duena.

It is not known how this protected, obedient young Senorita of a prominent family met and was courted by a young German immigrant named Charles Fischer. If the details were ever known, they were never revealed to us. Charles Martin Fisher, on arriving from Germany, had joined the United States Army. He served under General Custer, and as fate would have it, when Custer went to battle at the Little Big Horn, Grandpa Fisher's squad had been sent to another area with a Captain Ray. Custer's group of course, was lost, and after his discharge grandpa Fischer came to California, and ultimately was hired on the Rancho Bolsa de las Escarpines. We do know that Lucia's mother was upset that her children married people not of pure Spanish ancestry, or, in some cases, not even of the Catholic faith. How my beloved grandmother was able to be courted by, and ultimately marry in August of 1889, the man of her choice rather than that of

her parents was never discussed. We did learn that two other of Estevan and Asuncion's children did not marry Spaniards-- but extended the family into the Boin and Hartnell branches. We also heard that Grandpa Fisher had gone to Lucia's cousin, Marie Rose, and asked her to speak for him. A Spanish John Alden?

Family history reveals that Dona Rita, Don Estevan's sister, at this apparent lack of respect for tradition, during a fit of ill temper, shredded and burned all of the records of ownership of the large dowry, and it was lost to all future generations.

Charles was an excellent farmer, and superior dairyman. He tried vainly to explain to Don Estevan his wish to manage the ranch, but the Don was adamant that this should be done by his eldest son, who was interested only in the relatively lazy, serene life of a Spanish Don. Young Charles Fisher knew that under the young Don, the ranch would not prosper, and that he would never gain control of the property. He knew he must take his young bride, and establish himself elsewhere.

Charles and Lucia De La Torre Fischer moved to a small ranch close to Castroville to begin their family and ultimately develop a small dairy farm. What a pioneer my little grandmother must have been! This was in the late 1890s, and having little or no experience in the hard physical back-breaking work of ranch life, she managed to

make a home and assist her husband in making their living. Her first child was born, a daughter called Lucy, who later married Fred Marten DeMeza, a rancher from Evergreen. Fred and Lucy had three daughters, Mary Elise, Elizabeth Lueva, and Lucille Henrietta. The next child was also a daughter, My mother, who was named Mary.

How frightened and anxious my grandmother must have been when Mary, at the age of four, was seriously injured by a horse which had kicked her head, fracturing her skull. This crushing head injury was so severe that a doctor had to be summoned from Salinas. His name was Barry, and he must have been a real genius, for with the use of chloroform, and on the kitchen table in the ranch house, he performed brain surgery on my mother, removing the crushed bones from her skull. There was no knowledge of skull plates, or bone grafts, yet my mother lived until she was 83 years old, with no apparent after-effects of this early injury. There was an area on her head which was scarred, and no hair grew on this area, but it was covered by hairstyling.

What a marvelous nurse my little grandmother must have been. She took care of her little girl who was bedridden for over a year, applying poultices to combat infection, while still carrying out all of the burdensome chores of ranch life. She had a tremendous amount of faith, prayed almost constantly, and actually required my mother to wear an

undershirt made from horsehair as a penance to St. Anthony for my mothers recovery. She was truly a believer--and my mother did recover. This was indeed miraculous in the late 1890s with no real means of combating the infection and side effects of such an injury.

My mother married William Benedict Champion, who became Chief Sanitarian for the city of San Jose, and they had four daughters, Beatrice L., Mary Jane, Margaret E., and Ruth I., all of them born in San Jose.

The next child in the Fisher house was also a daughter, Rita, who married Phillip Benjamin, a pharmacist. They had two children; Gloria, and Phillip.

Rita was followed by a son, Charles, who remained a bachelor. Elise was the next daughter in the family. She married William F. Elliot, and they had two sons, Roy, and Dale. She became the first schoolteacher in the Fisher family. Adelaide was next, also a school teacher, and gifted musician, and she married Myron E. Hascall. The last daughter, and last child to be born on the ranch in Castroville, is Beatrice Fisher who married Gustav Bernhart. She also became a teacher, and had three daughters, Joan, Barbara, and Patricia.

In 1905, the family moved to San Jose, where their last child, a son was born. His name was William V. Fisher, and he was a pharmacist in San Jose for many years.

After living for a year or two on Alum Rock Avenue, the family bought their home at 420 North 6th Street where they remained, and where my Aunt, Beatrice Fisher Bernhart still resides.

Although the majority of the family history relates to Monterey County, Lucia and Charles children contributed greatly to the growth and development of Santa Clara County. Charles became a State-prize winning "buttermaker" and his son, Charles followed in his footsteps, and later worked for many years for the Marin Dell Milk Company in San Francisco. Rita became a Queen of the famous Fiesta de las Roses in San Jose. Elise taught for many years at Gardner school, Adelaide at Burbank School, and Beatrice at Berryessa School. William was a pharmacist at the Spartan Drug Store for many years, and later at the Santa Clara County Hospital.

The spelling of the Fischer name was changed to Fisher, because of repeated mispronunciation, and because the German spelling might produce controversy in the wake of World War I

All of the children, their children, and their children's children have grown up in the Santa Clara Valley, are extremely proud of their Spanish ancestry, and consider their heritage as "Californios" as being as special as those who look back to those whose ancestors arrived on the Mayflower.

Epilogue

On June 1, 1770, Father Serra stepped ashore at Monterey. Awaiting him was a thoroughly discouraged Portola. He would have much preferred to begin a settlement to the North in the Bay of San Francisco, but he had been ordered to take, hold, and fortify Monterey, and he carried out his orders to the letter. Father Serra said his first Mass, and thus was dedicated the Mission San Carlos Borromeo. We can only imagine how those brave Spanish soldiers, so long without a Priest, felt when that first altar was built, and the harbor was sprinkled with holy water, while the completely baffled Indians stood by and watched.

After the religious services, Portola made a short political ceremony of taking the land as personal property of King Charles the 3rd of Spain, built a small fort maintained by twenty men, and with relief, sailed back to Mexico, Never to return to California. He was through with California. He thought that somebody might find it a great opportunity, but it was not Gaspar de Portola. He never wanted to see it again.

Father Serra on the other hand, was very happy. At last he was President of the California Missions, and although there were thus far only two, he had visions of saving the thousands and thousands of heathen Indians to Christianity. A rich harvest for any missionary. The artery of

communication between the Missions was to begin and ultimately become El Camino Real. Thus began fifty years of peace and plenty. Life was leisurely and tranquil. Nature provided everything that could possibly be needed, Indians were trained to work with wool and leather, to work the fields, and plant the orchards.

These were the days of Old Spain; the days of Ranchos, of hospitality, of bull fights, of fiestas, and beautiful women. These were the days of the pastoral period of California, destined to end much too soon. Control of California was fast slipping, passing from Spain to Mexico after the revolution of 1821, and the vast land grants were rapidly being sold or lost. The most valuable asset was not surrendered however as the family went on, holding proudly to their history, and teaching the future generations to value their backgrounds and to become worthy of living in this paradise they struggled so hard to achieve for them.

My own children, and grandchildren are doubly blessed, for my husband's family have been Californian's as well. His grandmother, and his mother were both born on Balbach Street in San Jose, and his great grandfather was Marshall Billy Hopkins of Santa Barbara in its early days.

I would not be at all surprised to find that my little Spanish grandmother, and my husband's little Irish

grandmother nodded Good Morning to each other before or after services at St. Joseph's Church on Market Street in San Jose, one spry little lady, after Mass, turning toward Balbach Street, and the other stopping to buy my peppermints on her walk home to find me waiting on her porch on North 6th.

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