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JOHN GILROY

**HE LEFT HIS NAME
IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY**

by

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SUBMISSION TO THE 1989
CALIFORNIA PIONEERS OF
SANTA CLARA COUNTY
ESSAY CONTEST - (ADULT)
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PREFACE

John Gilroy left his native Scotland behind to raise his family in a land where no English-speaking man had settled before: the Santa Clara Valley. One would think that such a courageous move would be recorded by historians with reverence and respect. Yet the recorded life history of John Gilroy is a checkerboard of derision, confusion, and conflicting facts, leaving the reputation of the tall Scotsman in disrepute.

This paper is an attempt to set the oft-repeated story of John Gilroy in a different perspective, by examining some of the discrepancies in this historical record. Perhaps we can learn more from the discrepancies in John Gilroy's life than from the facts. In so doing, we may shed light on the way we recount our own local history, and learn what is important to us in the process of writing that history.

In his capacity as public information officer for the City of Gilroy, and as a historian for the Gilroy Historical Society, the author has had an opportunity to meet several Gilroys who have come to the Garlic Capital of the World in search of their roots, herbal or otherwise. He also had the opportunity to meet, become acquainted, and work with the descendents of John Gilroy.

The author would also like to acknowledge the help and support of the Gilroy Historical Society and the staff of the Gilroy Museum, notably retired director Mary Prien and current director, Pat Snar.

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Many local historians have to hesitate for a moment when asked who was the first English-speaking settler in California.

It shouldn't be a hard question. The name is a familiar one. In fact, he left his name, or rather, his mother's name, on a town in Santa Clara County. Gilroy.

British and Russians may have come and left, but it was a Scottish sailor who was the first to stay and establish his family tree in Northern California, here, among the native Indian, Spanish and Mexican populations (and later American settlers) that inhabited the fertile land of Santa Clara County in the early 1800s.

But not only is John Cameron Gilroy's place in history as the first non-Spanish-speaking settler in California obscured and debated, it is somewhat tarnished, as well. Not until this decade (the 1980s) was a plaque ever laid in his memory, and even then the dubious inscription raised more objection than honor.

THE INFAMOUS PLAQUE

The 4 1/2-foot monument at Gilroy's Christmas Hill Park, erected in June 1981, was a project of the local chapter of E Clampus Vitus. Also known as "The Clampers," this historical society with roots in the Mother Lode is known for mixing one part history with three parts alcohol. Evidently, the colorful aspects of John Gilroy's reputation as a gambler and womanizer appealed to the Clampers. As a result, their wording, perhaps penned at one of their infamous parties, did not exactly paint a bright picture of John Gilroy as a model citizen.

The leader of the "monumental" effort by the local Clampers was Louis Bonesio, himself a legend as the world's longest living heart/liver transplant patient. The ranks of the local E Clampus Vitus chapter also include one Ben Gilroy, Jr., the great-great-grandson of John Gilroy, who describes himself as an "honorary member." The Clampers' efforts were aided by the fact that the latter-day Gilroy had no objection to the tone, wording or location of the plaque.

Soon, however, an article in the Gilroy newspaper announcing the plan for the installation of the monument stirred up some opposition. It began: "He was a gambler, a chaser of women, a tightwad, and nobody liked him. So intense was the dislike, that a monument to his memory is about to be erected..."²

Being immortalized as a deserter, runaway minor, idle liar, and destitute squanderer isn't the wording most people have in mind for their own

epitaph. Although John Gilroy's descendants approved the wording on the plaque, historians, civic leaders, researchers and authors were outraged at the tone and the inaccuracies of the inscription. A number of changes were requested by then-councilwoman Roberta Hugan (now mayor of Gilroy) to correct what she called "ethnic slurs."

Due to the debate, the dedication ceremony was almost called off by Bonesio. At one point, he threatened to keep the original wording and place the monument on private, rather than City-owned property. But a hastily-called meeting with city officials finally resolved the disputes.

Some of the inaccuracies in the first wording were corrected, including an erroneous reference to Gilroy's wife's name as "Isabel." Also, references to his being the first non-Spanish-speaking settler were also removed from the plaque.³ The final draft read as follows:

"John Gilroy arrived at Monterey in 1814 on one of the North-West Co. trading ships, "Isacc (sic) Todd," which he deserted. He then fled to the Santa Clara Valley, marrying Maria Clara Ortega, and settling on Rancho San Ysidro. His rightful name was John Cameron, but having run away as a minor, he changed it to avoid being arrested and sent back home.

"The City of Gilroy is named for this Scot who lived in idle contentment, squandered his wealth, and died destitute on July 26, 1869, age 77 years (sic).

"Plaque placed with permission of the Gilroy Family."

"Dedicated June 13, 1981 Mountain Charlie Chapter No. 1850.
E Clampus Vitus. Right Wrongs Nobody."¹

But that wasn't the end of it. The controversially-worded memorial plaque couldn't even get dedicated in peace. The concrete foundation laid by E Clampus Vitus wasn't even dry before vandals defaced it. The day after the adobe monument was set, it was vandalized and covered with graffiti.

Ironically, the name "Maria," the correct first name of his Spanish heiress wife and a middle portion of John Gilroy's own baptismal name, was one of the names scrawled in the wet concrete. And to top it off, the festivities during which the plaque was dedicated were marred by a drunken brawl that exploded into violence when police tried to close the park.

THE REST OF THE STORY

And so the legend of John Gilroy continues to be one of controversy. The most often-repeated statements about his life are as follows: He got scurvy, fought with an officer, went AWOL, took an alias, married into wealth, gambled it away, caught rheumatism and died destitute. But is all of this the truth?

One may ask what the stalwart Scot did to deserve all of this backlash. Surely when he dropped his surname, Cameron, in favor of his mother's maiden name, he had no idea the future Garlic Capital of the World would someday be named after him. He ran hard to escape notoriety and ended up running headlong into it.

Although not frequently reported, there is evidence that the area's first Justice of the Peace did have some good traits, as well. He was a tall, upright man, and an intelligent mathematician who served as alcalde (mayor) of the district prior to his judicial appointment by Commodore Stockton in 1846. He was skilled as a cattle rancher, soap-maker and millwright, and was frequently a generous host to travelers on the road to Monterey. In a sense, he was a pioneer in the field of bilingual education.

Surely it was his positive traits that led John Gilroy to immortal fame as the town's namesake. Yet his shortcomings have always seemed to make the headlines, and get exaggerated due to their novelty. There is certainly a lack of agreement about the details of his adventure-filled life. But the discrepancies in John Gilroy's life are often more interesting than the facts.

YOUNG ADULTHOOD - DISCREPANCIES

For example, what were the true circumstances that led to John Gilroy's settlement in Northern California in the first place?

Some facts seem sure. Born in Inverness-shire in the north of Scotland in 1794, John Cameron was an adventurous teenager, and he shipped out about the time his family moved to England.

Most of the vagueness concerns his maritime record. Even his ship is a mystery. Some sources say it was a trading ship, the Isaac Todd, which most accounts (other than the plaque) say was owned by the Hudson Bay Company. The North-West Co. crops up in other texts. Alley, Bowen & Co. discredits both claims, and says that Gilroy told fellow settler Julius Martin that it was a British warship.⁴

The reasons for his separation from his ship will forever remain in doubt. One story blames it on scurvy, another says he jumped ship, another that he was banished after hitting a midshipman. They all could be truthful, if the scurvy story was an excuse to avoid reprisal for insubordination.

Perhaps more questions should be raised about why he didn't return to the ship before it sailed. Had he known it was leaving? Had he not fully recovered? Did he hide until it left, escape from sick bay, or search for another way home? The odds of his deliberately intending to settle in the new land seem slim, especially since some reports have him watching the harbor in Monterey for another ship for years afterwards.

Accounts differ on the very existence of John Gilroy's sidekick and fellow escapee from the hospital in Monterey, known as "Deaf Jimmy." Was he, too, AWOL from Her Majesty's warship, or the Isaac Todd? Did he, too, have scurvy, and thus seek the beef and vegetables that the mainland had to offer? We know only that he was a travelling companion and confidante. (We don't even know for sure that he was deaf.) One must dig through the archives to piece together that his real name was William Malcolm, and that, after watching Gilroy settle in Pleasant Valley, he migrated north to Sonoma where he died on the rancho of Juan Martin.⁵

MARRIAGE AND ACCULTURATION - DISCREPANCIES

In order to be allowed to remain in Alta California, John Gilroy and all subsequent settlers were forced to become baptized Catholics to swear allegiance to the Spanish crown. So John Gilroy soon became Juan Bautista Maria Gilroy by virtue of his baptism, which, depending on the source, took place at the mission in Carmel, the mission in San Juan Bautista, or the mission in San Carlos.

There is no question where and whom he married. In 1821, at the

mission in San Juan Bautista, John Gilroy married Maria Clara de la Asuncion Ortega, the heiress of the San Ysidro land grant. Maria Clara was the daughter of Don Ygnacio Ortega, a "soldado distinguido." The AWOL sailor had become a wealthy man.

John Gilroy mixed well with those he met, including members of the Portola party that discovered the San Francisco Bay. He learned Indian dialects and was often chosen as a guide on trips to Fremont Peak and other remote locations.

When Don Ygnacio died in 1833, John Gilroy became a naturalized Mexican citizen, and inherited a square league. (This was a measurement of land amounting to about 4,460 acres.) Equal portions went to Gilroy's brother-in-law (and card-playing opponent) Quentin Ortega, and to his sister-in-law Ysabel Ortega and her husband Julian Cantua. John and Maria's land covered the rich farmland between Pacheco Pass and Leavesley Roads, lands later owned by such settlers as the Felloms, the Fergusons, the Wentzes, the Holsclaws, and Julius Martin, most recognizable now as Gilroy street names.

The group of buildings on the Gilroy land were located along the current highway 152 from Ferguson Road to Frazier Lake Road. Along with the home of Quentin Ortega and buildings on his land, these structures became known as the village of San Ysidro. San Ysidro would have become the heart of present-day Gilroy had not the railroad tracks been laid a couple of miles to the west half a century later.

Today San Ysidro is referred to as "Old Gilroy." Most modern-day Gilroyans do not even recognize the fact that that humble cluster of old buildings is the birthplace of the current city. (Bonesio and E Clampus

Vitus appropriately considered Old Gilroy as the site for its John Gilroy plaque, but later chose the more populated Christmas Hill Park site three miles away.)

The residence of John Gilroy and Maria Clara no longer stands. But in its day, it was known as a hospitable place for travellers. Like his father-in-law, John Gilroy was a genial host, and learned to mix well with the indigent populations.

Known by all, and respected for his intelligence and his ability to socialize, John Gilroy served as alcalde of the district while it was under Spanish rule. When the United States began to consider California as a territory, he was a natural for a judicial appointment. This was the high point of his career, and it came in the form of a letter posted at San Juan Bautista, August 28, 1846:

To John Gilroy, esq.
U.S. Justice

"You will receive accompanying this letter, your appointment of Justice of the Peace under the government of the United States -- It is needless to say you will discharge all the duties delegated to you in said commission with fidelity and honour to yourself. Should you need any information in the prosecution of the laws, I would advise your consultation with Justice Walter Colton at Monterey. I am sir, your (obedient servant..Commodore Robert Stockton.)⁶

The low point of his life came not long after. He was criticized through the years for his addiction to the card game known as Monte. He would play anyone and everyone, including his own family, no matter how much he lost. Many acres of his estate were sold to pay off gambling debts.

This, then, was his doom. His applications for the 19th century equivalents of welfare and unemployment were rejected. In fact, on February

1865, about the time of his wife's death, John Gilroy made an application for financial assistance to the Society of California Pioneers, which was refused due to his not being a member of that association.⁷

In his arthritic old age and ill health, only the British Benevolent Society offered assistance. He died of rheumatism in July 1869. (Although the plaque has him at "age 77," he couldn't have been more than 75 at death if his birthyear was indeed 1794.) His body was laid in an unmarked grave in the old Catholic cemetery (which has also been vandalized.)

"Strange," said the Gilroy Advocate, "that the owner of a broad acreage who handled thousands of dollars in his time should have died without enough estate to buy a tombstone."

But was he really "destitute?" That was the belief in the 1870s and 1880s. The disgust over John Gilroy's lifestyle in later life may have led to many erroneous conclusions on the part of his neighbors. The ways of the Scottish sailor were probably as foreign to the other settlers (of East Coast/Puritan stock) as the Spaniards themselves were. His contemporaries described him as "reckless and extravagant," and believed he "wasted his substance in riotous living." But in fact, he actually left land valued at \$10,000, not a small sum in those days, a fact which may not have been fully revealed until this 1894 account:

"C.D. Wright has applied for letters of Public Administration Secord upon the estate of John Gilroy, who died in this county July 26, 1869. The estate consists of about 1,000 acres of land in this county, and the purpose of the proceedings is to quiet title to about eighty acres, which were not administered upon in previous proceedings. The heirs are William (dec. 1870), (O.N.) Jose Neofito (dec. 1877), (Caterina) Catarino, and (M.G.) Miguel (dec. 1873) Gilroy, children of the deceased, the ages and residences of whom are unknown. The 1,000 acres is of the probable value of \$10,000."⁸

DESCENDANTS

If nothing else, John Gilroy succeeded in leaving much progeny to populate the town which bears his mother's name, and the other agricultural valleys of the State. He and Maria Clara had no less than seventeen children (although eight died in infancy, and three others died childless). In turn, twenty-five grandchildren lived to pass on the rich Scottish/Spanish heritage.

Of the children of John Gilroy, the last to die, Catarino (1832-1911), was the most well known, due to his large family and his renown as a cattle rancher and farmer. Catarino, Sr., however, also seems to have parted company with his own holdings. His obituary states that he "did not own a foot of soil that once belonged to his father or grandparents."⁹

Caterino's son, Caterino, Jr., lived only 30 years, dying only three months after his father. He fared a little bit better in his obituary in the Gilroy Advocate, which said, "He led a quiet, upright life and was popular with associates."¹⁰

Caterino, Jr.'s son Benjamin was born in a house on Chestnut Street in Gilroy in 1906, two-and-a-half months after his father's marriage to Delphine Martini. Ben Gilroy had a dream of regaining the Gilroy property lost to gambling debts a century before. In 1936, the dream came true: he started his dairy ranch on Pacheco Pass with 20 head of cattle. In 1945, he purchased the 53-acre Schrepfer ranch on Pacheco Pass and Ferguson Road, and five years later added the 113-acre Watson Ranch at Bloomfield Avenue and Frazier Lake Road. He was married to Angelina Bettencourt for 56 years before his death in 1985.¹¹ She died in 1988.

Their son, Ben, Jr., took over the property, and with his sons, the fifth and sixth generations continue farming hay on much of the same soil, in the tradition of their enigmatic ancestor. Today the Gilroy ranch house on Pacheco Pass Highway isn't obtrusive, but it has character; it isn't historic, but a lot of history resides there. There are scrapbooks of the family reunions held there every year. Farm implements and the remains of vintage automobiles decorate the grounds. A pack of uniquely-shaped dogs (poodles and Bouviers) stand guard over the farm equipment.

Ben Gilroy, Jr., was the one chosen to be "in politics." He was on the boards of the Gilroy School District and the now-defunct Gavilan Water Conservation District. He is especially proud that when the Masonic cornerstone beneath the new Gilroy High School is removed 90 years from now, the name Gilroy will be recognizable in the list of school board members.

A bright-eyed and energetic great-great-great-granddaughter, Julie Gilroy Spier, became an employee of the City of Gilroy in 1982, serving, perhaps ironically, as senior citizen activities coordinator. Of her historic maiden name, Spier says, "It was great for starting conversation!"

OTHER GILROYS

Many other scions of the Gilroy clan have journeyed to Gilroy, California, in search of their relatives. Each is referred to the Gilroy Museum or to Gilroy family members in Gilroy, Hollister, or the Central Valley. Each is given a chart of the Gilroy lineage (see appendix), and is left with a positive feeling about their possible ancestry. Retired Museum Director

Mary Prien continues to correspond with Alexander Gilroy of Scotland regarding the genealogy.

Though John Gilroy was undoubtedly of Scottish descent, another stalwart sailor, Matthew Gilroy, vice president of Northgate Exploration, Ltd. of Dublin, Ireland, came in search of his roots in 1984. Matthew's ancestors emigrated from Scotland to Ireland in the 1700s. One of Matthew's American friends describes him as "a true Gilroy: he gambled away land, too. He speculated in mining stock."¹²

Jim Gilroy, mayor of Cottage Grove, Oregon, visited Gilroy in September 1987, looking for his own legacy. Ironically, Jim Gilroy's father, a World War II veteran, had changed the family name from Kilroy. His visit brought new meaning to the expression, "Kilroy was Here."

RIGHTING OF THE WRONGED

John Gilroy did get a break from the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce's Hall of Fame Committee, which was charged in 1983 with honoring the area's pioneers since the date of the City's incorporation (1870). But since the City began with a board of trustees as early as 1868, the committee bent the rules to move its timespan back two years, making John Gilroy (1794-1869) just barely eligible. He became a charter enrollee and was added to the Hall of Fame plaque at Gilroy's City Hall in 1984.

Though the Gilroy name is slowly being cleared, a couple of other injustices have been glanced over by historians. What about "Deaf Jimmy"? Did anyone ever christen him as the second non-Spanish settler in the area?

What about John Cameron's Scottish father and his clan? What reparations have been made to the man who was robbed of his rightful legacy as the Scottish patriarch of Cameron, California, home of Cameron Foods, etc.? Perhaps the only concession ever made to the Camerons was made by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Gilroy, Jr., who in 1963, named their first son Robert Cameron Gilroy.

Still, John Gilroy remains one of the most misunderstood and colorful of our local ancestors. The plaque controversy is itself now history, and there are no hard feelings over it. Indeed, the entire incident serves best as another tall tale for the Clampers. So despite the best intentions of modern historians, exaggerations and parodies of the story of John Gilroy continue to proliferate (see epilogue).

Yet somewhere, as he gazes down upon the burgeoning city that bears his name, a betting man would wager that the stalwart Scot is smiling.

##

EPILOGUE

Today, in the modern Garlic Capital of the World, John Gilroy remains the brunt of good-humored jokes and satire. Perhaps the best example is this piece, originally presented in the "Garlic Speech" competition for the Miss Garlic Festival Queen Pageant in 1982:

John Garlic was born John Cabbage in 1794. As a young man, about the time he joined the Royal Navy, he changed his name, since his mother was a Garlic. In 1814, he sailed aboard the good ship La Della Catezzon, bound for the new world. When the ship landed at Monterey, John Garlic went AWOL, jumping ship with his friend Deaf Chili. Together, they walked north along El Camino Real to the Jack-in-the-Box at the corner of First and Monterey. Munching on an order of onion rings, they decided to build a city. They laid out the first street parallel to El Camino Real and called it Gourmet Alley.

John got a job working on a rancho for the wealthy Spanish landowner, Don Parmesano. Soon he fell in love with the don's lovely daughter, Maria Clara de las Onions. In 1821, they were married at the mission at San Juan Linguisa.

As a wedding gift, Don Parmesano gave the happy couple their own farm on Pacheco Pasta Road. Farming was tough but the Garlics clove to it. It wasn't long before they had a lot of their own little sprouts scampi-ing around the farmhouse.

Soon the Garlics became wealthy in their own right, and like good garlics they wanted to spread it around. Unfortunately, Garlic and his wealth were soon parted; he lost his riches playing "California Stud" and drowning his sorrows at the bar at Sandrino's. In his later years, even his characteristic aroma seemed to get worse and worse.

Nevertheless, John Garlic died, the town fathers decided to hold a festival in his honor. It was an immediate success. Each year they had to make the festival bigger and bigger, because so many people came, there wasn't mushroom.¹³

FOOTNOTES

1. Plaque inscription, E Clampus Vitus.
2. "Group plans monument to unlikely character," Foley, Jack, Gilroy Dispatch, May 8, 1981.
3. "John Gilroy Plaque Being Unveiled at Christmas Hill," Gilroy Dispatch, May 15, 1981.
4. Alley, Bowen & Co., 1881. The History of Santa Clara County, 273-274.
5. Alley, Bowen & Co., 1881. The History of Santa Clara County, 273-274.
6. White, George Willson, Gilroy's First Century of Incorporation, Dispatch Publishing, 1970; transliterated from original handwriting by Chuck Myer.
7. Alley, Bowen & Co., 1881. The History of Santa Clara County, 273-274.
8. Gilroy Advocate, September 15, 1894.
9. "Gilroy's namesake features on new monument," BONANZA Days Supplement, Gilroy Dispatch, May 27, 1981.
10. "San Ysidro settled first," Gilroy Dispatch, Centennial edition, Dec. 21, 1970.
11. "Ben Gilroy (obit.)," San Jose Mercury News, June 16, 1985.
12. "Gilroy meets Gilroy," Nancy McCarthy, Gilroy Dispatch, July 17, 1984.
13. Myer, Chuck, "The Adventures of John Garlic," oral presentation by Lupita Gaeta, Gilroy Garlic Festival Pageant, 1982, and "Backstages," Gilroy Dispatch, 8/3/82, 7/25/85

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