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Victor Castro:
Stranger in a Familiar Land

In the early morning of October 12, 1492, the piercing cries of “Tierra! Tierra!” were heard from atop the mast of the sailing vessel famously known as the *Pinta*.¹ Thirty-three relentless days of ship travel fraught with the usual complications of disease and the inevitable social and emotional consequences of human intercourse were temporarily alleviated as Christopher Columbus and his shipmates came upon an island in the West Indies called Guanahani. Although Columbus believed he had arrived in Asia, an erroneous belief he held to his deathbed, his discovery was the beginning of a new chapter in world history as the door to lands yet known to Western explorers was thrust wide open.

Columbus’ success garnered the interest of later explorers and through their subsequent exploration and conquest the gradual colonization of North America moved forward in earnest. Spanish explorers frequently participated in the brutal subjugation and conquering of indigenous people often in the pursuit of gold and other forms of pecuniary gain. The other benefit, of course, was the actual possession and control of the land itself. One vivid example foundational to this examination was its colonization of Mexico. Spanish authorities engaged in continual exploration throughout that country and in the late eighteenth century took a great interest in *la alta parte de Mexico*, an area later to be known as California. In 1775, Spanish authorities ordered the establishment of

¹ Mark C. Carnes and John A. Garraty, *American Destiny: Narrative of a Nation* (New York: Longman, 2003), 21

a settlement near the San Francisco Bay. This settlement, led by Captain Juan Bautista de Anza, became the first Spanish-speaking settlement on the bay. The establishment of a military post in that area required the stationing of soldiers including a Spaniard named Francisco Castro. Francisco would later sire numerous children to include a son named Victor Castro born in 1820. Victor, much like his father, would later make his mark upon Northern California and would play an influential role in the development of that area.

Victor was part of a group later known as the *Californios*, a designation shared by other Mexican-Californian individuals and families who also participated in the development and defining of California during its transitional period. In much the same manner as the other prominent *Californios*, the amount of land and assets amassed by Victor and his family allowed him to enjoy a plentiful and financially secure life and he was well acquainted with the lands he owned and occupied. However, this was to come to a quick end. Historical inquiries into the decline of the *Californios* have frequently arrived at the consensus that this development was due to the imposition of taxes, squatter settlements, and litigation over property ownership, factors that, for the most part, were forces from without that existed apart from the actors themselves. Although some historians, such as Leonard Pitt, who penned the influential book *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890*, have given some consideration to the *Californios'* inability to adapt to the sudden infusion of Anglo culture. It is difficult to argue that the conclusions reached by previous inquiries are quite exhaustive and contributed to the decline of the *Californios*. The question at hand is whether or not Victor's decline was the result of these factors, and, if so, the degree of their contributions. The answer is ultimately found in them but there were also

other more subtle influences at work that cannot be revealed by most previous inquiries that have tended to examine the *Californios* as a group and fail to take the character and experiences of the individual into account. While the following examination will address and confirm some of the previous assertions, namely the impact of Anglo politics (to include taxes), squatters, and litigation, it will also focus upon two other factors, forces from within, that have received less attention and helped contribute to Victor's decline: family envy and the very nature of Victor Castro himself.

It is virtually impossible to begin this undertaking without having a clear understanding of the manner in which *Californio* families obtained their lands and assets. The primary means through which the *Californios* acquired land during early nineteenth century California was the Mexican land granting process. In brief, this process required that claimants present a request to the governor of their respective territories that included their names, vocations, and as accurate a description as possible of the desired land. The governor would in turn direct the local political officer to "examine the land requested and report whether it could be granted without injury to third persons or the public."² The official would report his findings to the governor and based upon this report, the decision made to send the request to the Territorial Deputation or Departmental Assembly, where final granting was made. The government received requests from a wide array of prospective landowners, but, as is the case in our own times, certain claims were given precedence especially for those with political alliances. Victor's father, Francisco, was one such person.

² *Morning News Gazette*, November 30, 1973

Francisco had successfully served in the Spanish militia and became one of the privileged by virtue of a large grant of land given to him by Governor Antonio Luis Arguello in 1823. Helen Follett Richards explains:

*Francisco Castro...retired from the army...and was rewarded for his services by a grant of the great San Pablo rancho stretching from the bay of San Francisco on the contra costa to the summit of the cerros, and from the creek called codornices to Pinole, containing many leagues.*³ [Editor's note: the southern boundary was actually established as Cerrito Creek.]

In more concrete terms, the land given to Francisco consisted of five square leagues or approximately thirteen square miles, an area known as the Rancho San Pablo. After years of service to the crown Francisco, whose family came from very humble origins, had established himself in the area and he would later serve on the Municipal Council in San Francisco and as an *alcalde*.⁴ He died in 1831 and his will divided his lands and property between his wife, Gabriella, and their ten children. Gabriella received one-half of the Rancho and the remaining property was divided equally among the children, to include Victor. Victor was eleven-years old at that time and in 1841 he and his brother, Juan, decided to increase their holdings and “applied for and received a grant designated as being the surplus lands lying between San Antonio (Alameda county) El Pinole, San Pablo, Acalanes and Laguna de los Palos Colorados ranchos”.⁵ This grant, eventually approved through the efforts of Victor's brother-in-law, Governor Juan Alvarado, resulted in their acquisition of nearly twenty thousand acres of land, land later to be

³ *Richmond Independent*, January 6, 1966

⁴ *Ibid*;

⁵ Mae Fisher Purcell, *History of Contra Costa County* (Berkeley: Gillick Press, 1940), 186

known as the El Sobrante rancho (the Spanish word *sobrante* signifying the surplus nature of the land as it was situated outside already settled and granted portions).

By 1852, Victor had accumulated large portions of land through both inheritance and his own efforts. According to county assessment records, Victor owned 160 acres of land in the San Pablo and Pinole Ranchos in 1852. 1853 shows an increase in land reflected by his ownership of 1920 acres of the San Pablo Rancho, 1610 acres of the El Sobrante Rancho, and an unstated amount of acreage in the Pinole Rancho valued at \$7,000. 1854 was an even more spectacular year, as Victor was able to count 11011 acres of the San Pablo Rancho among his holdings. In addition to these land-holding figures, Victor also managed to increase the value of his personal property from \$300 in 1852 to \$8,994 in 1854.⁶ These figures are striking and although they demonstrate Victor's accumulation of land and wealth they would also prove to be as fleeting as they were impressive. What exactly were the forces from without that would eventually lead to his and many other *Californios'* loss?

In 1848, the first ominous sign of threat to the *Californios'* land and wealth made its presence known in the form of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This document, a consequence of the Mexican-American War, ceded California to the United States and questions regarding its impact on Mexican land grants accompanied its arrival. According to the Treaty, all Californians would be entitled to all the rights of the United States according to the principles of the Constitution to include the right to be secure in their liberty and property. The Treaty did not result in an immediate threat to *Californio*

⁶*Assessment Records of Contra Costa County*, Contra Costa Historical Society. These records are somewhat problematic due to their omission of certain properties from one year to the next in spite of evidence the omitted properties were owned during the assessment period. Two other areas at issue are the occasional reference to property value without stated acreage and a lack of the records themselves for certain years. However, they do provide reliable evidence of trends in light of other corroborating evidence.

property but the document in conjunction with other political wrangling did change the rules of the game. Legal ownership now required that the person show evidence they had resided on the property, constructed a house, placed livestock on the land, and erected fencing and corrals since the time of the original granting. Failing to do so did not nullify the land grant but provided a legal basis for challenge by another claimant. More importantly, the burden of proof of ownership and legal title now shifted to the grantee.⁷ Although the Treaty itself did not bring the *Californios* to their knees, it would prove to be the first in a series of events that would prove devastating at its fruition. Commenting on these developments in his series of newspaper articles on the Castro family, the late Contra Costa County Historian George C. Collier noted with some dismay, “This act...was to cause years of trouble for the claimants of Spanish and Mexican land grants”.⁸

The second development of note occurred March 3, 1851 when Congress approved a bill under the title “An Act to ascertain and Settle the Private Land Claims in the State of California”. This bill required those holding grants under Spanish and Mexican authority to report to a commission within two years and present their case. Successful pleas resulted in a survey of the concerned property being made and submitted to the United States Land Office for final approval. Although this process appeared to offer some surety, this was not the case. Confirmation of the grant did not protect the grantee from third-party challenges and the fact these challenges were to be resolved at the local level was even more problematic. Damaging further was the fact that if the “claimant had mortgaged, sold, bargained, or in any way had encumbered the interests

⁷ *Morning News Gazette*, November 30, 1973

⁸ *Ibid*;

in the land prior to the date of the patent, the title reverted to the interest of the third interested party or parties”.⁹ Other pertinent legislation during this period included the Homestead Act and Possessory Rights Act, passed in 1851 and 1852, respectively. These Acts were designed for the purpose of populating the state and encouraged individuals to settle upon lands they believed were unoccupied. Their denial of the knowledge of prior ownership was the only requirement.¹⁰

The ramifications of this legislation were far-reaching and its impact would become all too readily apparent. The cumulative passage of these legislative acts and the Treaty opened the door for the widespread challenge for lands held by the *Californios*. Exacerbating these states of affairs was also the lack of defined boundaries as the original grants issued by the Spanish-Mexican government were lacking in specificity thereby creating nebulous boundaries. These ambiguous boundary lines coupled with the recent legislation also set the stage for the invasion of squatters that raged like a plague upon the lands of the *Californios*. Some of these squatters, armed with inside information, would settle on the yet to be surveyed land of the grantees in the hopes that the ground they occupied would be declared government property after the survey and therefore subject to claim.¹¹ The sad and dark comical reality of this was illustrated by one of Victor’s contemporaries, John Francis Sheehan, Jr. Sheehan, a writer for the *Overland and Out West* magazine, studied and wrote about the problems faced by the ranchos. Sheehan tells a story of a Mexican rancho owner who was granted a portion of land the dimensions of which were fixed by four landmarks, three

⁹ Ibid;

¹⁰ The Brothers Patten, “A History of Berkeley, From the Ground Up,” *The Later Arrivals*, [www.http://historyofberkeley.org/chapter03.html](http://historyofberkeley.org/chapter03.html) (accessed 10/18/2008)

¹¹ Purcell, *History of Contra Costa County*, op. cit., 187

immovable, and a fourth, moveable. Employing an early frontier version of entrepreneurship, the rancher came upon the idea to move the fourth landmark, a hut, and by doing so he increased the scope of his ownership by nearly six square miles. A later government survey was completed and the rancher was now the official owner of a larger piece of land.¹² This story would be funnier had it not helped seed the tragedy later faced by the *Californios*.

A final consideration affecting the *Californios* was their subjection to property taxes. It has been said many of the *Californios* were “land rich and money poor” and this was certainly true for the most part. They frequently lacked the cash funds necessary and were forced to sell portions of their lands to avoid further legal action; the threat of judgments and foreclosures hung over their collective heads unceasingly. Victor did not escape unscathed as evidenced in an 1852 report from the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors where he is listed as being liable for \$82,704 in taxes on his assessed properties.¹³ In some instances, Victor was required to sell some of his property to settle his tax bill and also suffered from the levying of judgments against him.

In summation thus far, it is clear the development of Anglo politics in the form of legislation as well as the presence of squatters, taxes, and ambiguous property lines were external forces that bore down upon and impacted Victor as it did other *Californios*. However, Victor’s life, not unlike our own, was the sum of competing forces: both those from without and those from within. He was compelled to respond

¹² John Francis Sheehan Jr., “The Story of San Pablo Rancho,” *Overland monthly and Out West magazine* 24, no. 143 (1894): 519-520 (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu>. Accessed 10/26/2008)

¹³ *History of Contra Costa County*, (San Francisco: W.A. Slocum and Company, 1882), 221

to situations and developments that were not of his making, with the nature of those responses being determined by his character. If we are to understand the tragedy of Victor Castro we must consider this equation in its entirety not just the first portion. It is here that we now find ourselves peering into the forces from within: Who was Don Victor Castro and how did his character respond to those external forces and contribute to his fate?

The use of the title *Don* (Spanish for “gentleman”) in this portion and hereafter is both purposeful and necessary since Don Victor was, first and foremost, a gentleman. Any examination that earnestly seeks to understand Don Victor must consider the paradigm through which he viewed the world. Newspaper accounts of his death refer to him as “a man who belonged to another age”.¹⁴ The goal of this statement may be an attempt at drawing a comparison between him and the emerging and later burgeoning capitalist culture crafted by those who infiltrated the Pacific West in pursuit of financial gain. Don Victor’s Spanish heritage was very influential and his father Francisco had a strong hand in his early life. Helen Follett Richards relays:

His son [Victor] partook of the combined graces of French and Spanish courtliness and chivalry, in turn imparting to his son Victor a nature chivalrous and brave with an innate courtesy that made him apparently better fitted for the court than a life in the wilderness of Nueva California¹⁵.

In spite of this, Don Victor attained the title of *juez de campo*, a “judge of the plains” who was widely known as an excellent horse rider who fought valiantly against Indians and squatters who threatened his land. In his article, *Don Castro Fights the*

¹⁴ *Independent*, January 6, 1966

¹⁵ *Ibid*;

French, author William Mero states Don Victor had a “reputation for never smoking, drinking, or using profanity”,¹⁶ and Follett adds he was a “typical example of the better class of Spaniards, the *gente de razon*”.¹⁷ Sheehan, a keen observer of the *Californio* persona, also noted their “*trustful and generous nature*” [italics added] and goes as far as to declare this attribute a “well-known characteristic of the race”.¹⁸ Unfortunately, these salient characteristics of Don Victor would prove to be both a blessing and a curse. Evidence for the proof of Don Victor’s character is found at various points in his life and some were documented by his contemporaries who were fortunate enough to have interacted with him. One such man was Charles H. King, the founder of King City, California.

Charles was born in New York and at 10 years of age he traveled to Pittsburgh where he worked in a print shop. He later made his way to California and engaged in gold mining. At some point during his stay, he encountered Don Victor Castro. Charles was weak and sickly from his work in the mines and Don Victor took him in and nursed him back to health on his rancho. Upon his recovery, Charles worked a few years for Don Victor and “remained a friend for life”.¹⁹

Another benefactor of Don Victor’s generosity was an Anglo named William Heath Davis. In his memoirs, *Seventy-five Years in San Francisco*²⁰, Davis paints a picture of

¹⁶ William Mero, “Don Victor Castro Fights the French”, www.cocohistory.org/essays-don-castro.html (accessed on 9/28/2008).

¹⁷ *Richmond Independent*, January 6, 1966

¹⁸ John Francis Sheehan Jr., *op. cit.*, 518

¹⁹ The Monterey County Historical Society, “Charles H. King—The Early Years,” www.mchsmuseum.com/kingcity.html. (accessed on 10/18/2008)

²⁰ William Heath Davis, *Seventy-five Years in San Francisco*, www.sfgenealogy.com/sf/history/hb75yac1.htm. (accessed 10/18/2008) The source cited here is based upon fragments and notes of a completed manuscript left by Davis. The manuscript itself went missing

life during California's Pastoral Period. Davis, a native New Englander, made his way to California and settled in San Francisco in 1845. He later married Maria de Jesus, the daughter of the wealthy ranchero, Don Joaquin Estudillo. Davis, a friend of many of the rancheros, declared that Don Victor was kind and obliging to his callers...[He] entertained them [travelers] as guests at his home" and was "generous to a fault". Davis also recalled being the personal recipient of Don Victor's hospitality.²¹

Although these instances provide but a glimpse into the psyche of Don Victor they were not anomalies. He did not limit his generosity and hospitality to his intimates but was also known to provide food and provisions to new arrivals drawn by the discovery of gold.²² Perhaps these were the same arrivals that were causing him much consternation and trouble, which brings a key question to light. His interactions with Davis and King were occurring after 1853 when his trouble with the primarily Anglo squatters and litigation (largely the result of Anglo politics and policies) were at full tilt. Why, in spite of the obvious trouble brought by the Anglos, did he continue to deal with them in what was for the most part a spirit of trust and generosity? A policy such as this would prove to be devastating and is exemplified in his trusting but tragic relationship with three men in particular: two Anglos and a fellow Spaniard. These three men, Horace Walpole Carpenter, John B. Frisbie, and Ramon de Zaldo, would all play a role in Victor's undoing.

Carpenter hailed from New York and settled in California in 1848 upon completing his law degree. The reason for his migration was not the Gold Rush (news had yet to

following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The fragments and notes were found by his heirs and are currently housed at the Huntington Library.

²¹ Ibid;

²² *Richmond Independent*, January 6, 1966

reach New York) but was more likely due to the recent success of the United States in its victory over Mexico and the potential opportunities on the Pacific Coast for an ambitious young man such as himself.²³ Carpenter campaigned for a Senate position but upon failing to be elected to the State Senate in 1850 he opened a law office in San Francisco. At some point during his stay in San Francisco, he met and entered into a working relationship with another Anglo who would also play a role in Don Victor's life named Edson Adams. As stated earlier, Don Victor and his brother Juan filed for and were granted the land in 1841 that was to become the El Sobrante Rancho. Unfortunately, the Departmental Assembly did not give approval due to the unspecified boundaries of the grant at that time. As a result of passage of the Act on March 3, 1851, the two retained attorneys in that same year, Carpenter being one of them, and presented their case to the U.S. Commission for grant confirmation. Carpenter, an adept attorney, assured the two he would be able to prove their land claims for the fee of one-eighth the settled property.

In 1852, Carpenter introduced evidence the brothers had occupied the land following the provisional granting in 1841 and the property had been stocked with livestock and met the other occupation requirements as stated in the new legislation. Following further court proceedings and refinements, primarily driven by interested parties from the adjacent ranchos who debated the findings of various surveys and maps impacting their own boundaries, a grand total of 19,932.25 acres of the El Sobrante Rancho land was awarded to the brothers in 1883. Tragically, history bears out the fact that this apparent success of Don Victor's was merely an illusion. Unbeknownst to him,

²³ Albert Norman, "Horace Walpole Carpenter" (M.A. thesis, St. Mary's College, 1965), 4

Carpenter, more or less in collusion with Frisbie and De Zaldo, was busy orchestrating a devious plan that would give him more of the Castro's land.

De Zaldo was a well-educated Spaniard who gained the trust of Don Victor (but not Juan) and offered them assistance. At issue in this case was Don Victor and Juan's inability to remove the squatters residing on his land. According to court records, De Zaldo, who spoke English and had knowledge of the Anglo courts, allegedly suggested that he and his partner, Frisbie, assume management of the El Sobrante Rancho. De Zaldo and Frisbie allegedly made arrangements with the Castro brothers whereby they would act as their agents and sell portions of the Rancho to the squatters. The Castros were to receive \$40,000 and the remaining Rancho lands were to be allocated to De Zaldo and Frisbie for their fee. On November 23, 1853, De Zaldo and Frisbie alleged the Castros sold them the Rancho for \$100,000. Following the "sale" in 1857, Carpenter purchased one league of the Rancho from De Zaldo and Frisbie and also received "one-fourth of one-half of the Rancho, and interest equal to one-eighth of one square league...[and] another square league on June 1, 1857."²⁴

Later court proceeding regarding these alleged transactions reveal Victor's character and the role it played. During a panel conversation hosted by the Moraga Historical society in 1973, panel member Mrs. Sorrick, referring to the original court transcripts, commented on the initial 1851 meeting between the Castro brothers and Carpenter, stating, "Victor Castro thought this was great, and agreed immediately, but later said

²⁴ *Morning News Gazette*, December 1, 1973

his brother, Juan Jose, didn't like any part of it, and evidently had a feeling about Mr. Carpentier [Carpenter] right from the very beginning".²⁵

While determining if greed was the motivating force behind Don Victor's ready agreement is speculation, Juan's reaction is very telling. Juan frequently acted in concert with Don Victor in the pursuit of land and based on this it seems reasonable that he had the same interests in mind. If this was true, why did Juan have such severe reservations about Carpenter's offer? The evidence here would seem to point to one condition, Don Victor's trusting nature. The same holds true for his arrangement with De Zaldo. It is equally difficult to argue that De Zaldo's shared Spanish heritage was not a factor of trust for the two of them.

In 1853 another telling event occurred this time involving Don Victor and two associates of Carpenter's named Edson Adams and Andrew Moon. Don Victor entered into a mortgage with these two men and signed a paper for \$6000 plus interest at five percent per month. He secured the mortgage with his portion of land in the San Pablo grant. Moon later sold his interest to Adams and Carpenter and the two demanded payment. He failed to pay the amount and following six years of legal proceedings a court levied a judgment in the sum of \$154,325, an amount the Castros would never be able to pay.

In a later court hearing involving this case, Don Victor alleged that "Adams and Carpenter had tried to deceive and defraud, and that there was collusion; also that he had trusted Carpenter".²⁶ He also continued to deny any knowledge of the details of

²⁵ Mrs. Sorrick, interviewed by Brother Dennis, *Horace Walpole Carpentier Program*, Moraga Historical Society, January 8, 1973.

²⁶ *Ibid*;

the agreement and Carpenter (a plaintiff in the case) told him to file a “confirmation of statements” to that effect but Victor never did so.²⁷

Don Victor’s reason for not filing or presenting any evidence regarding his alleged ignorance of the facts in the agreement is unknown. Had he possessed clear evidence in his favor one would assume he would have pursued that course with a vengeance. On the other hand, he may well have not known the full extent of the agreement and entered into the transaction on the basis of trust. If this was the case, a public acknowledgement would cause a man such as him intolerable embarrassment. Consequently, his failure to answer resulted in a doubt that allowed him to maintain and portray a sense of what he was: a gentleman who practiced and valued the importance of trust. This latter proposition seems to align itself more closely with his nature.

These examples illustrate the manner in which Don Victor’s character responded to situations that developed outside his control. The result of this interface was clearly a financial disaster for him and begs the question as to why he responded in such a self-destructive manner. The answer to this is quite simple and absolute: Don Victor could have responded in no other way. The attributes of trust and generosity were so deeply ingrained in his persona that he was incapable of stepping outside that part of his character even at great personal cost.

The final part of this examination is also the most tragic as it touches on two of the darker dimensions of family relationships that strike a chord within all of us if we dare peer into our own intimate circles. These two dimensions, envy and greed, were present and rife within Don Victor’s family and their contributions to his plight were

²⁷ Ibid;

quite impacting. Frequent attention has been given to the impact of litigation brought about by those outside the Castro family but the internal state of the family itself was one of avarice and its role cannot be ignored.

The death of Don Victor's father Francisco in 1831 gave birth to the envy and greed that coursed through the veins of the Castro family. Don Victor's brother, Joaquin, was named executor of the will and Francisco's will bequeathed half the Rancho San Pablo land to his wife Gabriella with the remainder to be divided among his children. Some family members unsuccessfully "appealed to a Mexican law, which, it was claimed, permitted only a life estate to vest in the widow of [Francisco] Castro, and urged that the property be divided in equal shares among" the survivors.²⁸ The total of Gabriella's land holdings increased even more as she received the shares of three daughters who predeceased her. On August 2, 1851, Gabriella entered into a deed that would give her daughter, Martina, the entire portion of her estate which she later received upon Gabriella's death on December 18, 1851. Family tensions regarding Martina's newly acquired possession became even more contentious when she married Juan Alvarado, the former Mexican governor of California. Speaking of the impact of this situation, author Mae Purcell says "it proved the cause of considerable dissatisfaction among the remaining heirs and was one of the reasons for the protracted litigation which involved title of the rancho lands".²⁹ Much of this litigation was confined within the family itself. Martina's brothers challenged her legal right to the land and she was forced to secure legal representation to counter those efforts. As was

²⁸ John Francis Sheehan Jr., *op. cit.*, 521

²⁹ Purcell, *History of Contra Costa County*, *op. cit.*, 137

the unfortunate but necessary custom of the Castros, the attorneys accepted payment in kind in the form of Martina's land.

Throughout the relentless legal challenges leveled by family members against one another were also their efforts to nullify and even completely set aside Francisco's will. Such a tactic, if successful, would have opened the door to an incalculable number of scenarios but this never came to pass. In some instances, family members sold portions of their estate for cash or to fend off creditors. Purcell cites one particular but not atypical case in which Don Victor's brother, Juan, mortgaged one-eighth of the Rancho to a creditor with the agreement that he would repay his debt according to contractual agreement. His failure to do so resulted in his interest being sold under foreclosure proceedings and the land deeded to an outside party.³⁰

Internal strife and envy within the Castro family not only resulted in the fragmentation of their lands but was also the impetus for a chain of unintended causation that would have dramatic effect at its pinnacle: the relinquishing and transference of family property into the hands of largely non-family Anglos. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by following the legal battle of a man named Joseph Emeric.

Emeric had obtained parts of the Rancho San Pablo property through various means "to include 2/22 parts from Jesus Maria Castro and Francisca de Moraga, two [Castro] heirs".³¹ Emeric brought suit against Juan and Martina Alvarado and other Castro heirs and there were hundreds of other parties to the action as well. Needless to say, *Emeric vs. Alvarado* languished through the courts for years until it was finally settled

³⁰ Ibid;

³¹ Ibid;

in court and a partition decree of 1894. Those with Castro surnames were awarded approximately seventy acres of Rancho San Pablo (Victor received a scant thirty-one acres) while Emeric, clearly the winner, was awarded well over two thousand acres of the same Rancho. Unfortunately, both Emeric and Alvarado had died prior to the conclusion of the proceedings and further litigation ensued well into the twentieth century.

Exactly what does this particular case have to say about the Castro family and the gradual erosion of their lands? This case stands as one of the end products of their internal strife and envy. Their family behavior not only assisted in the loss of their lands but also hindered them from acting in concert toward beneficial aims and against outsiders seeking to relieve them of their property. Perhaps if the family had bonded together following the death of Francisco the oft repeated processes that culminated in actions such as *Emeric vs. Alvarado* could have been avoided.

Since this examination is about Don Victor Castro, the question of his own behavior within the family comes to light and needs to be addressed. Did he act in an envious and avaricious manner or was he above such behavior? The evidence for making such a determination is somewhat lacking and we are left with few sources from which to evaluate this. Fortunately, one source does exist that provides compelling evidence about the man and his family relations. On May 5, 1900, Don Victor Castro died and left that source in the form of a will. The will shows him bequeathing slightly more than two hundred acres of property and assorted items to various family members, a mere remnant of his previous fortune. However, amongst the listing of worldly items

exists one sentence that provides one of the keys in our quest to understand Don Victor Castro:

*To my daughter Isabelle who with my other children by my first wife have brought lawsuits against me and involved me in much trouble and sorrow I leave my forgiveness and ten dollars.*³²

This sentence indicates Don Victor Castro may have been a victim rather than a perpetrator of family ills in many cases. Although his bequeathing of ten dollars may seem a bit gratuitous, or even vindictive, we are also struck by the fact that his parting emotion is that of forgiveness. This is how Don Victor Castro wished to be remembered by his family.

The search for reasons behind the plight of Don Victor Castro and other prominent *Californios* is both complex and difficult. As stated at the onset of this examination, a thorough analysis must consider both the forces from without and within and the manner in which the two coalesce if one is to arrive at a plausible and comprehensive explanation. Even then, as with all historical inquiries, the explanation is but one of many and the same holds true of Don Victor Castro. Many of the factors contributing to his plight were outside his control but two other less regarded forces from within, his character and family envy, also played a critical role. Don Victor's character interfaced with the outside forces in a manner that aided his financial decline. This begs the question as to why he responded in such a self-destructive manner. The answer to this is quite simple and absolute: Don Victor could have responded in no other way. The attributes of trust and generosity were so deeply ingrained in his persona that he was incapable of stepping outside that part of his character even at

³² Will of Victor Castro, Contra Costa Historical Society

great personal cost. The second factor, family envy, also played a decisive role not only in Don Victor's plight but also that of the Castro family itself. Their behavior inadvertently serves to illuminate the character of Don Victor Castro even more for us.

The goal of any historical investigation is to generate further questions and explain the local in order to understand the universal. It is here that we now find ourselves. The lingering question to ponder regarding the plight of Don Victor Castro is this: Had he been able to step outside his character and his family able to set aside their envy and come together to preserve their great estate, would the historical outcome been different? The more universal questions revolve around the impact of colonization and the meaning of being a Californian during the time of the *Californios*. Don Victor certainly struggled with the rapidly changing demographics and economic nature of California during this period and it is true he, like many other *Californios*, was less than successful with the transition. In the case of Don Victor, however, one wonders if this was intentional; journalists described him as an anomaly and a man from another time. In any event, there is not debate that Don Victor Castro was a man who once held vast properties in a land he called home. However, he fell victim to events beyond his control and these, coupled with his responses to them, caused him to become a stranger in the land that he once called home.