

THE ADOBE AT CERRITO CREEK

By Earl L. Scarbrough

For:

EL CERRITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

El Cerrito Historical Society  
P. O. Box 304  
El Cerrito, CA 94530

## DON FRANCISCO CASTRO AND THE RANCHO SAN PABLO

Born in 1775 in the town of Cinaloa, District of Sonora, Mexico, Don Francisco Maria Castro, became a soldier in the Army of Spain and was sent to the Presidio of San Francisco at about 1800. There he served as a Corporal of Artillery, and later became a member of the Provintial Assembly of Upper California.

In 1823 Don Francisco petitioned California's first Mexican Governor, Governor Louiz Arguello, for a grant of land on the Contra Costa (opposite shore). He received a temporary (provincial) <sup>Provisional</sup> grant in April 1823 of over 19,000 acres of wilderness occupied by Indians, deer, Grizzly bear, antelope, coyote and mountain lion, in what is now the cities of Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito and Kensington.

It was to this wild country across the bay that Don Francisco moved his wife, Dona Gabriela Berryessa de Castro, and their children to become the first white settler in Contra Costa County.

Don Francisco built an adobe house on the banks of Wild Cat Creek at what is now the South West Corner of San Pablo Avenue and Church Lane in the City of San Pablo. There he established the headquarters of his Rancho San Pablo. He planted an orchard with many fruit trees, a vineyard, built a mill and sowed fields of wheat, corn and beans. Over the years he saw his herds grow until 1400 head of cattle, 600 sheep and 600 horses roamed the rancho's unfenced ranges and hills. Life on Rancho San Pablo must have been as hard as any pioneer life could be, but still pleasant, for the rancho was the scene of many fiestas and other happy gatherings. The rancho's cattle supplied the family with food as well as hides and tallow for the "Yankee Trade".

Don Francisco lived on his rancho until his death on November 3, 1831. He died at the age of 56 years, but left behind a rancho that was to be

the cradle of Contra Costa County's infancy and the birthplace of its civilization. Don Francisco was buried in San Francisco at the Chancel of Mission Dolores.

Three years after his death, Dona Gabriela and their ten children received a final decree of ownership of Rancho San Pablo From Governor Jose Figueroa.

## DON VICTOR CASTRO

One of Don Francisco's sons, Don Victor Castro was born at the San Francisco Presidio in 1820. In 1839 he married Louiza Martinez of the neighboring Rancho Pinole. With his new wife, Victor moved from his paternal home in San Pablo and located on a small knoll at the Rancho's Southern boundary, adjacent to Cerrito Creek and in the lee of Cerrito hill, (Albany Hill).

It was at this spot that Victor with the help of local Indians, built the first structure in what is now the City of El Cerrito. Don Victor's adobe had a frontage of sixty feet. Several rectangular shaped interconnected buildings contained thirteen rooms and formed a quadrangle.

An open air patio in the middle was surrounded by a wide veranda. One wing of the adobe served as a chapel and another the stable. Back of the home was an orchard of pear, plum and cherry trees and further back the vegetable gardens.

From this hacienda Victor Castro ranched his lands as well as operated a ferry from San Francisco to Point Isabel, which was named after his daughter Isabella, and he provided an overnight rest for miners on their way to the gold fields. The Rancho prospered and Don Victor with his wife raised their six children. Four of the children died and they were buried in a small cemetery near the adobe where he had planted roses, lillies and evergreens to make it beautiful. Victor would never allow the graves of his children to be marked with a stone, for he said, "I know well enough which of my children is buried here. It is not the concern of the world, but my own alone."

Educated by the mission padres and trained by his parents in the combined influence of his grandparents, French and Spanish heritage,

Don Victor retained through his life the manners, language and ideals of a Spanish nobleman. He was never known to gamble, he did not use tobacco nor liquor and it is said that a profane word never passed his lips.

Don Victor's hacienda became a gathering place for almost every notable who visited California during that period. It is said that General Guadalupe Vallejo and Don Victor's brother-in-law Juan Bautista Alvarado, met there to map the strategy for their campaign to drive the unpopular Governor Manuel Micheltoarena back to Mexico; and it was there that the author Bret Harte started writing his play, "Two Men from Sandy Bar."

During Mexico's fight for independence against the tyranny of Napoleon III and Archduke Maximilian, Don Victor was commissioned as a Captain and joined an expedition that sailed by schooner from San Francisco to San Blas. Marching inland he met with Benito Juarez and the Mexican troops. He fought through the campaigns that resulted in the overthrow of the French regime. For his services he was made a Colonel in the Mexican Army.

After the war Don Victor returned to his Rancho and lived out the remaining troubled years of his life. He passed away in 1898, and was buried beside his children in the grave yard he had laid out.

## PARTITION

Little did Don Victor's father, Don Francisco know when he made his final will that the document would result in the ultimate destruction of his beloved rancho. In his will he left one-half of his property to his widow and the other half to be divided equally among his eleven children. Unfortunately a series of events took place that circumvented Don Francisco's good intentions. To begin, three of the children died, and their share of the rancho also went to the widow Dona Gabriela. On August 2, 1851, Dona Gabriela, in consideration of natural love and affection for her daughter, Martina, willed all portions of the rancho which she controlled to Martina. Hence, Martina and her husband, Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado came to control 15/22 of the entire rancho while the other seven Castro heirs including Don Victor could claim only 1/22 each.

Naturally, ructions ensued. The heirs filed court action in 1852 in an attempt to break the will that Don Francisco had made twenty years previous. In the years that followed, court action followed court action, and the title to the property became so involved that no son or daughter could know what was really his. To complicate the situation, from time to time the various heirs sold portions of their holdings to American settlers. Finally after forty-two years of title litigation, the California Supreme Court handed down a final decree of partition on March 3, 1894. The decree, of 750 pages, resolved the questions of ownership and divided the Castro lands into many tracts of property held by private owners. All that was left in the hands of the Castro family were a few acres surrounding the adobes in San Pablo and El Cerrito.

## THE CASINO

As the twentieth century became a reality, Don Victor's adobe lay in abandonment like that of his father's in San Pablo; weeds and thistles grew over the orchards and gardens, and ruin and neglect stalked the once happy scenes of rancho days. The Grandees were dead, the adobes in ruin and a magnificent rancho was no more. Over the years the San Pablo Adobe passed into private hands and became a warehouse for the Adobe Drug Store that had been added to the front of the old building. The Adobe was finally demolished in 1954 to make room for a motel. A plaque on the Northwest corner of the Thunderbird Motel at the corner of Church Lane and San Pablo Avenue marks the spot where the historic old hacienda once stood.

In El Cerrito, Don Victor's Adobe fell into decay until the early 1930's when "Big Bill", William A. Pechart a Sacramento gambler took a lease on the building and after extensive remodeling turned the adobe into a sophisticated gambling casino, aptly named "The Rancho San Pablo." The old chapel was refurbished into a fabulous dance hall with rosewood paneling. Unbelievable thick rugs covered the floors of the gambling rooms and the old adobe again came to life as croupiers dressed in satin laped jackets spun roulette wheels and snapped the dice, while chorus girls dressed in Spanish costumes as well as entertainers Edgar Bergan, Lillian Roth and others provided gaiety to the merry makers. One can wonder if any of the jubilant crowds that flocked into the casino ever gave thoughts to the buildings' pastoral past when it was the proud home of a fine gentleman; where gold seekers rested from their journey, where children played youthful games in the patio and where a family bowed their heads in worship at a small chapel, where their dreams, labors, fortune and misfortunes

became the realities of their life.

The end of Rancho San Pablo as a gambling casino came during World War II. A dog racing track that flourished at the back of the casino closed, and the property was converted into a mobile home court that housed thousands of shipyard workers. "Big Bill" moved on to Reno where he became a pit boss at the Mapes Hotel and in 1965 died of a heart attack. When the lights of the casino were turned off for the last time the adobe once more returned to solitude. After the war the mobile homes moved out and a drive-in movie theater was erected on the site. The old hacienda remained vacant through the years. Automobiles were driven across and parked over the tiny cemetery. Juveniles, most of them high school boys, often prowled the premises. Many windows, some of them heavily barred, had been broken and all of the valuables had long been removed from the adobe. The interior of the structure became littered with debris and fallen timbers.

In 1955, the site was purchased for the construction of the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center by the Albert Lovett Company of Berkeley from the estate of Julia B. Galpin, daughter of Don Victor. Immediately, considerable controversy developed over whether the adobe could be preserved as a historic monument or would be demolished for the multi-million dollar shopping center. El Cerrito City Councilman Leo Armstrong had sought to introduce a resolution that would keep the adobe as a permanent structure in El Cerrito. Paul Hammarberg, architect for the Albert Lovett Company, started a survey to determine the feasibility of moving the old buildings intact or leaving them where they were as a monument to the county's first family.

Then, on the evening of April 20th. 1956, two off-duty El Cerrito firemen, Lieutenant William Dugan and fireman James Sadler, were at the adjacent El Cerrito Motor Movies with their families. Dugan,

visiting a friend in the projection room noticed sparks flying out of the adobe, then came billowing black clouds of smoke. Sadler, who had also seen the fire starting to erupt into the night, raced to the projection room to call the Fire Department. He and Dugan ran to the adobe and into the patio area to determine if anyone was inside the structure. So rapid did the intense fire sweep through the old buildings, that Dugan and Sadler barely escaped. Numerous El Cerrito residents in the downtown and hill area noticed the sky beginning to turn a brick red and flooded the Fire Department with calls. When El Cerrito's first engines arrived under the command of newly appointed Fire Chief Edward Herman, the entire inside of the building, was on fire and huge orange-red flames leaped a hundred feet into the night sky.

Chief Herman immediately called all El Cerrito Fire Apparatus and all off duty firemen into the fire as well as apparatus and men from the neighboring Fire Department in Albany. Fire engines from Berkeley and Kensington manned El Cerrito fire houses for the protection of the rest of the City.

Soon after the fire started, electricity to some of the downtown districts was shut off. Flames and rolling smoke filled the air providing the only immediate light to the area, and attracting a crowd of thousands. Traffic was blocked for nearly two hours on San Pablo Avenue as the curious flocked to the scene. Engines laid approximately 6,000 feet of fire hose and firefighters fought to gain control of the blaze. The barred windows and crumbling walls made it difficult for firemen to get close to many parts of the building. Then after a three hour battle, the flames flickered and died under the deluge of water, and, as the flames died, so died the last landmark of the county's first Mexican Rancho.

In the predawn hours as Fire Chief Herman prowled the smouldering ruins of the adobe, he became acutely aware of the smell of kerosene. The fire had been set.

Spearheading an investigation was El Cerrito Police Lieutenant Homer Johnson. After checking every available scrap of information, the veteran officer found himself at a dead end. It was not until four months later that the Police Department received an anonymous phone call revealing the responsible's names. Within a few days two teenage suspects were administered a polygraph examination. And after questioning, the two fifteen year olds admitted purchasing ten cents worth of kerosene in a half gallon can at a gas station at Bay View and San Pablo Avenue. Both youths then walked south on San Pablo Avenue approximately two miles until they reached the adobe. Entering the abandoned building, they poured the contents of the can through the rooms, and igniting a paper bag, threw the flaming bag into the puddles of kerosene. Fleeing the building, both boys entered the Cerrito Theater where they were overheard talking about the fire approximately one-half hour before the firemen saw the flames from the motor movies and turned in the alarm. When asked their reason for setting the fire, the lads related, "The City was dead on Friday nights and they wanted a little excitement. Besides, I heard somebody say they were going to tear the place down. I decided to get rid of the place--burn it down." Later in the day, officers took the boys back to the scene of the fire. They pointed out where they had spilled the kerosene, and searching the area, located the can in which they had carried the flammable.

The two youths were charged with arson and turned over to Contra Costa County Probation authorities.

In the weeks that followed, workmen and bulldozers wrote the

final chapter of the Rancho San Pablo as they cleared away crumbling adobe walls and leveled the little knoll to accommodate a facility of another era--a modern shopping center.

Perhaps today, one may be forgiven if, when driving along San Pablo Avenue between El Cerrito and San Pablo, and amid the rows of homes and shops, stops for a moment and breathes a nostalgic sigh for the days when the Castro's rode across the hills through leagues of flowing grass tending their grazing herds.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- History of Contra Costa County by M. Purcell 1st. Edt. (1940)
- History of Contra Costa County by W.A. Slocum and Co. (1882)
- History of Contra Costa County--Historic Record Co. (1926)
- Landmarks of Contra Costa County by M. Purcell
- Old California Houses by M. Parsons (1952)
- The Story of Richmond by L. Fridell (1954)
- Historic Spots in California by Hoover, Rensch, and Rensch 3rd. Edt. (1966)
- El Cerrito Fire and Police Department Reports.
- Richmond Independent and Oakland Tribune Newspaper Articles from the day following the fire.
- Interview with El Cerrito Police Lieutenants Homer Johnson and Ray Carlson.
- Interview with El Cerrito Assistant Fire Chief William Dugan
- Richmond Independent New Vista's 3 June 1972, Article by Russ Whiting.
- Richmond Independent 8 January 1966, Article by Helen Follett Richards