

The Forge

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Coming Home to El Cerrito

Descendants of Victor Castro
gather for a family reunion
during the city's centennial

By Janice Castro

Growing up on my family's cattle ranch in the '60s, on Castro Ranch Road in El Sobrante, I heard lots of stories about our family's history. How great-great-great-great-grandfather Joaquin Isidro Castro came north to the Bay Area with his family in 1776 as part of the Juan De Anza expedition out of Mexico. How his grandson, Victor Ramon Castro, built Rancho del Cerrito on his large ranch in the foothills near Cerrito Creek, starting in 1837.

Born at the San Francisco Presidio in 1817, Victor Castro lived there as a small child, then on his father Francisco Maria Castro's Rancho San Pablo, north of El Cerrito. Francisco died in 1831 when Victor was 14.

A few years later, Victor moved to the southern portion of the family land and developed his rancho. In 1837, he married Maria Luisa Antonia Martinez Arellanes, daughter of Juan Ignacio Martinez and Dona Maria Martinez Arellanes.

Ignacio Martinez had been the comandante of the San Francisco Presidio at the time young Victor lived there and knew the Castro family well. Both Dona Maria's parents and Victor's father and grandparents had been part of the De Anza expedition.

The grantee of Rancho el Pinole, Martinez became the third alcalde (mayor) of San Francisco (then known by its original Spanish name, Yerba Buena) the year Victor and Maria Luisa were married. According to a 1963 biography written by his great-granddaughter, Kathryn Burns Plummer, Martinez remained at his rancho in the Pinole Valley while serving as alcalde, commuting to his city job by boat.

Victor Castro was entrepreneurial. He developed a pier



The Victor Castro hacienda around 1912 (El Cerrito Historical Society)

at Point Isabel (named for his daughter Isabel), learned to sail and traded with ships coming into San Francisco Bay from around the world.

In "El Cerrito Historical Evolution," by Edward Staniford, published by the El Cerrito-Kensington Bicentennial Committee and the El Cerrito Historical Society in 1977, Staniford writes that Castro "acquired a schooner and whaleboat for his embarcadero. Victor developed his land, raising grain, fruits, vegetables and livestock. He shipped surplus crops to the growing community of Yerba Buena and cattle hides and tallow to Boston brigs anchored in deep water off Yerba Buena Island." (The fast-moving brigs were very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries as naval vessels and merchant ships.)

Castro also developed the first ferry service across the bay. In 1843, Staniford writes, Victor Castro "was ap-



Victor Castro as a young ranchero (ECHS)

pointed juez de campo (judge of the plains), the official who directs rodeos for processing cattle and referees disputes among rancheros – an indication of the prominent status achieved by the young ranchero.”

When I was about four, my parents took us to visit Victor’s adobe hacienda one Sunday. The once beautiful, richly appointed home was now a California Historical Landmark, but had fallen into disrepair. We were lucky to visit at that time. Soon thereafter, in 1956, the hacienda was burned down in an arson just as the El Cerrito Plaza was being developed on the site.

Victor Castro’s home, at first a simple adobe structure, grew as he added western and northern wings, and then a second story, setting this three-winged home around a 75-foot-square plaza open to the east. A scale model of the Castro adobe can be seen in the Dorothy and Sundar Shadi History Room [link: <http://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/shadihistoryroom.html>] at the El Cerrito Historical Society.

Samuel Newsom, a well-known architect, visited the home a few years after Victor died, when his family still owned the hacienda, and described it in a 1907 article, “The Home of the Castros.” [link: <http://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/castroadobe.html>]

Newsom wrote: “From the grounds, there is a beautiful view of the bay and the San Rafael mountains, with Tamalpais and its Sleeping Maiden purple and partly veiled in twilight.” The adobe walls were three feet thick. Newsom described the plantings of cactus, periwinkle, and Castillian and Marechal Neil roses, and the row of gum trees providing cooling shade on the west side of the home.

Some of the first history recorded in El Cerrito is found in the pages of Victor Ramon Castro’s bible, copies of which the El Cerrito Historical Society was given by Victor’s descendants in the Wahlander family. As each of his children were born, he recorded the time and date and described their baptism, listing their godparents. Examples:

“In 1842, birth of my son Patricio on the 16th of March at my Rancho del Cerrito at two in the afternoon, and was baptized in the Mission San Jose by R. P. Lorenzo Quiras. His godparents were Don Guadalupe Castro and Dona Francisca Martinez.

“In 1849, birth of my daughter Isabel at my Rancho del Cerrito on the 8th of July at seven o’clock in the morning, and was baptized by R. P. F. Langloy in the Capilla de la City of Yerba Buena. Her godparents were Don Guillermo Smith and his wife Dona Susana Martinez.”

On another page in the bible, headed “Marriages,” Victor wrote:

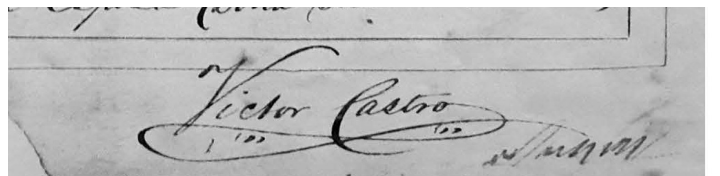
“In 1837 on the 18th of October ... with Dona Luiza



Janice Castro, her brother, James, and her father, Percy Castro, Jr. on the adobe’s balcony in the 1950s.



A model by Charlie Moran of the Castro hacienda, on display in the Shadi Room at El Cerrito City Hall.



Victor Ramon Castro’s signature in his bible.

Martinez, daughter of Don Ignacio Martinez and Dona Martina Arellanes at the Mission San Rafael by the Rev. Padre Lorenzo Quijas. Signed, Victor Castro”

I knew, growing up, that some of my ancestors had been involved in settling San Jose and San Francisco. Our family had owned Mare Island (and reportedly named it for a mare that jumped off a Castro barge ferrying horses from the north bay, and swam to the island).

The ranch where I lived was the last piece of the El Sobrante land grant that Victor had secured, extending his land in El Cerrito to the north. Victor had once planned to build a town [there] called “New Berkeley.” Four generations of my family had lived on that land.

My great-grandfather, Victor's son Patricio, built the home where I lived as a child. Vic and Vern Castro, two of Victor's great-grandsons who grew up in that house, became [World] Champion cowboys.

After college at Berkeley, I moved to New York City and pursued a career in journalism, and later, teaching at Northwestern University. It seemed that every time I came home to visit my folks, the freeways were sprouting new branches, the old familiar roads were becoming heavily used commuting routes, and rural towns were becoming upscale suburbs studded with shopping malls, coffee bars and international cafes.

It made me want to know more about the lives of the people who lived here before everything was paved over. I read about the Native Americans who lived in this region for thousands of years, and began to collect more information about the first Castro settlers in California.

During the past 20 or so years, I've been researching my family history off and on as I found time. My mother's family was from Ireland. So was my Dad's mother's and his father's mother's. Thanks to the Internet and its constantly expanding wealth of research resources, I developed a family tree, and pieced together the lives and histories of hundreds of relatives.

Along the way, I got to know some nice people at the El Cerrito Historical Society, Tom Panas and Joanne Rubio, who have done a good deal of research on the Castro family and early history of the area. My brother Jim, sister Evelyn Miller and cousin John Brennan and I provided them with some information and photos. John's family gave the historical society a redwood slab door that had once been part of the Castro ranch in El Sobrante.

Three years ago, Tom and Joanne told us El Cerrito was planning a huge Centennial year in 2017 to celebrate the town's history. Victor Castro's family had settled the area. El Cerrito grew up in part on Rancho del Cerrito. The El Cerrito planners were wondering if my siblings and I and some of our cousins might like to march in the Centennial Parade on September 16, 2017.

We'd be a unit: the descendants of Victor Ramon Castro and his first wife, Maria Luisa Antonia Martinez. Cousin John and his sister Maryann and I volunteered to help organize our far-flung family. How complicated could it be? I think we were imagining maybe 20 people marching.

We had no idea what we were taking on. While a few of us live far from the Bay Area (Montana, Pennsylvania, Hawaii) most of our family is still on the West Coast, ranging from Seattle to San Diego. The majority live in central and northern California: Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, Granite Bay, Sacramento, Chico, Berkeley,



*Victor Castro headstone at Sunset View Cemetery.
(Janice Castro)*

Moraga, Walnut Creek, San Francisco, Danville, Livermore, Oakdale, Salinas, Carmel.

And most of them wanted to come! The idea caught fire at a family wedding in Seattle in the spring. One of my cousin's daughters asked me a few days before the parade: "When was the last time this many of your cousins got together?" I only had to think for a second: "Never." We realized we were organizing the biggest Castro family reunion any of us had ever heard of.

By June, I was the main information contact for most of the family members interested in coming. Cousins working in everything from cattle ranching, real estate development and crop science to software development, media, teaching and banking were excited about connecting with family, some of whom they'd never met.

I was talking to some newfound cousins. I had found two of them through Ancestry.com, after submitting my DNA. They were descended from Victor's daughter, Isabel. Another cousin, whom I'd met online in an early genealogy BBS (bulletin board system) in the mid-1990s, and met again through Ancestry DNA, was descended from Victor's daughter Josefa. Still others were descendants of his son Patricio's wife Henrietta's family.

Family members whom none of us could name were becoming known to us through our shared DNA. And some of them were planning to march in El Cerrito.

Our Brennan cousins (whose family owned the wonderful sports bar in Berkeley by that name) are the grandchildren of Patricio's daughter Victoria. They would host the after-party. Our cattle ranching cousins were bringing their horses. My brother was organizing the big post-parade lunch at Brennan's. Our group included a retired Berkeley Fire Chief: he used to cook Thanksgiving dinner at the firehouse, with top-quality meat from my father's shop, the P. L. Castro Meat Company in El Sobrante.

Our group kept growing. As the day approached, even with the inevitable last-minute scheduling and logistical

conflicts, we were expecting about 70 family members. Three generations of Castro descendants (the 7th, 8th and 9th generations in California) would be marching, the youngest just nine months old.

During the last week of August, when my husband and I were visiting family and fly-fishing in Montana, the parade organizers contacted me and asked if I would do an interview with Rick Radin of the East Bay Times. His article ran on August 30, 2017: (<http://www.eastbay-times.com/2017/08/30/centennial-el-cerrito-pioneer-family-to-be-in-anniversary-parade/>).

On the day before the parade, my husband and I drove the route to familiarize ourselves with it. The next morning, we would be driving a classic Mustang convertible provided by Barbara Harris, a friend of El Cerrito. Victor Castro and several family members once buried at the hacienda are now in Sunset View Cemetery. When we stopped to visit his grave, we watched a flock of wild turkeys and a small band of white tail deer roaming across the peaceful meadow where Victor rests.

And so it was that at 10:30 a.m. on September 16, 2017, I drove a Mustang convertible at the prescribed parade speed of 3-to-5 mph, just behind our Murray ranching cousins on horseback, along with my sister, my husband Bob, and cousin Roger in a cowboy hat. Up front, about 50 family members marched behind a banner reading: “Descendants of Victor Ramon Castro and Maria Luisa Martinez.” We waved at the crowds along the route winding up to Cerrito Vista Park and they smiled and waved back.

The horses were a hit: Seven of our cousins were riding, and two little Murray girls had decorated their ponies with glitter and hoof polish.

The people of the El Cerrito neighborhoods the parade was winding through could not have been friendlier. “Viva El Cerrito!” we shouted. And a few folks shouted back, “Welcome home, Castros!” (I have since joined the El Cerrito Historical Society. I hope to learn more about the history of my family there, and to share information I have with the ECHS researchers.)

After the parade, about 50 family members gathered at Brennan’s in Berkeley for a reunion lunch. Everyone found parking nearby, even our horse riders with their 32-foot truck-and-trailer rigs.

Later, as people were beginning to head home, we suddenly remembered the group picture. We gathered everyone outside for a few moments in the wind. The next morning, as my husband Bob and I headed home to western Pennsylvania, we stopped at a deli in the San Francisco airport to buy a sandwich to take along. I couldn’t resist the one called “The Castro.”



Above, Janice Castro driving the Mustang in the city’s centennial parade in 2018, with Evelyn Castro, front passenger; Robert Petri, left rear; and Roger Ostarello in cowboy hat. (Marin Stuart) Below, the Murray family rides in the parade. (Jovita Kerner)



The family reunion picture on the front steps at Brennan’s. (Courtesy Castro Family.)

El Cerrito Historical Society board members:

President David Weinstein, Vice President Chris Horn, Treasurer Pat Shaw. Members at Large: Joanne Rubio Tom Panas, Chris Treadway, John Falconer; Acting Secretary Dianne Brenner

Reception for El Cerrito pioneers planned for spring

The El Cerrito Historical Society is planning a celebration of our Pioneers: those who were born in, or very near, El Cerrito before 1940.

These Pioneers grew up here and their families were part of the early days in El Cerrito.

Our first Pioneer Reception was held at City Hall in 2014. We interviewed the Pioneers and wrote a short biography of their life story. We would like to do the same for this event for

inclusion in the El Cerrito Historical Society's archives.

If you, or someone you know, qualifies as part of this group of Pioneers please contact Tom Panas via email at tmpanas@yahoo.com.

You may also print out and mail this form to:

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

Person submitting this form: _____

Phone: _____

E-Mail _____

I have asked this "Pioneer" for permission to suggest his/her name.

Name of Pioneer: _____

Contact (list at least one)

Phone: _____

Address: _____

E-Mail _____

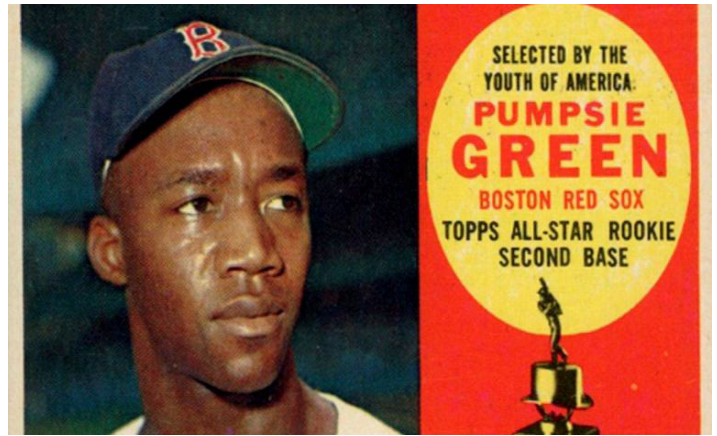
Program about Pumpsie Green at annual meeting

The historical society always likes to start the new year with a really special talk to accompany our annual meeting. This year we have a particularly appealing program about a gentleman who was well liked and played an important role in the fight for civil rights.

Please attend **“Pumpsie Green: The Man Who Integrated the Boston Red Sox,”** a talk by Pete Elman, with Arif Khatib and Nat Bates.

Pumpsie Green was the first African American to play with the Red Sox, in 1959 – 12 years after major league baseball first integrated. Mr. Green, who died in 2019, attended El Cerrito High and later lived here.

Elman is a Bay Area lecturer and writer who knew Mr. Green. Khatib, founder of the Multi-Ethnic Sports Hall of Fame, and Bates, a longtime Richmond councilman and former mayor, were also Green’s friends.



The talk will follow a brief business meeting and election of officers. 3 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 26 at the Community Center, 7007 Moeser Lane. Refreshments will be served.



Archivist passes the torch

When Barbara Hill joined the historical society board six years ago and took on the task of organizing our archive and collection, she recalls, much needed to be done. How much of the collection had been catalogued to that point?

“Zero. Not a thing,” she says. Since then Barbara has managed to catalogue about 30 percent of our holdings, newspapers, letters, photos, manuscripts and more, often working with volunteer Christine Roed.

Barbara, who has lived in El Cerrito 44 years, chose PastPerfect as the best software for this task and taught herself to use it.

The society is seeking volunteers to form an ar-

chiving team.

Barbara has left the board to care for her ailing husband. We wish both well and will miss Barbara’s presence on the board. She contributed much to decision-making over the years with good ideas for programs, superb judgment, and a no-nonsense style.

She will remain involved with the society, planning to do a presentation in 2020 about genealogical research, her obsession.

Barbara, jokingly perhaps, attributes her interest to “prenatal influence.” Her mother was researching her own family history in the Library of Congress when Barbara was in the womb.

“She had relatives who looked down on her, and she wanted proof that her family was just as good as anyone’s,” Barbara says. As a girl Barbara found the research materials fascinating.

Working as a library assistant for a school, a scientific research library, UC Berkeley, and the San Francisco Public Library also taught Barbara much about archives.

“I’ve always enjoyed local history,” she says. “I like to know about where I’m living. El Cerrito has an interesting history, and (the city) is big enough to enjoy, and not too big to be annoying.”

Barbara, who can be amusingly self-deprecating, says, “I don’t have any creative abilities at all. I can’t draw. I can’t sew. I can’t even cook. I can’t garden. But I crave research.”