

In the days of bears and bulls

Last trace of city's Villa days lies at Branciforte School

Branciforte
MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel correspondent

A PERSON can hardly live in Santa Cruz and not know about its most important historical monument which marks Holy Cross Mission, for which the town and county were named.

But there's another monument not so well known although hundreds of people pass it daily. On Water Street go up Chalk Rock Hill — yes, that's what it was called for years, and you will see it on the other side of Branciforte Avenue, across from the finger-lickin' place. It stands on the school lawn.

This bronze plaque commemorates the founding of one of Spain's first three civil settlements in Alta California: Villa de Branciforte, also referred to by early historians as "The Village that Vanished."

Actually, it "vanished" when it was swallowed up by the City of Santa Cruz. Before that gradual change took place, it for some years was called "Spanish Town" then "East Santa Cruz."

Branciforte began with a bang and ended with a sigh for the good old days when bears and bulls fought to the death down on the flat. It came into being when the King of Spain became uncomfortably aware that other nations were eyeing this part of the world with great interest. In fact, they were doing more than just looking. Russia had moved onto the Northern California coast and England was hoping to claim it for the Queen.

Spain claimed first dibs because the Franciscan Missions were being established with a small garrisons of soldiers; however those armed forces were not powerful enough to fight off a large invasion. They were intended only to keep the hostile Indians in line. So the King decided that more important settlements were necessary.

THREE PUEBLOS (towns) were planned, with retired Spanish Army officers and their families to be the settlers. The pueblos included Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles, or Los Angeles as it is known today; El Pueblo de San Jose de Guadalupe, which is today's San Jose, and the Villa de Branciforte which was named for the Viceroy Marques de Branciforte of Mexico.

Great plans were made. The settlers were promised adobe houses with tile roofs, garden plots and farm lots, tools and supplies. But the Villa's beginnings were hardly auspicious. To begin with, the first settlers to sail into Monterey Bay in 1797 were convicted criminals from

Mexico. One look at the Villa site and they may have wished they were back in a Mexican jail. There were no houses or tools and no one was handing out supplies or the free pesos that had been mentioned also.

Early May can be chilly. The pioneers hurriedly put up some crude shelters and got along the

best they could until supplies began to arrive. The Spanish army people also arrived eventually and the Villa was on its way.

The officers and men had served 10-year enlistments, they received pensions from the crown and were supposed to be "on call" for military duty when needed. Most of them were married, with

families.

An efficient town plan had been drawn up by Alberto de Cordova, a Spanish engineer, but his plan was never followed. The Villa just sort of "grew" along what is today's North Branciforte Avenue which was the horse race track in those days. The Plaza, or town park, which was the center of the

settlement, was located where the school stands today.

PLEASURE WAS the order of the day. The Spaniards were world famed as accomplished horsemen. They owned fine animals and they took great pride in showing them off, racing and betting. Even on Sundays! To the horror of the Franciscan padres across the river.

Bear and bull fights were staged as often as a grizzly could be roped and dragged in; dances and parties were a way of life. Everyone was intent on having a good time. Of course the Indian neophytes across the river at the Mission noticed all this activity and were tempted to abandon the straight and narrow for the fun life at the Villa.

The padres wrote letters of protest to Mexico and Spain to no avail. They were finding it difficult to keep their neophytes, whom they had been teaching to plant crops, to weave and tan leather and build.

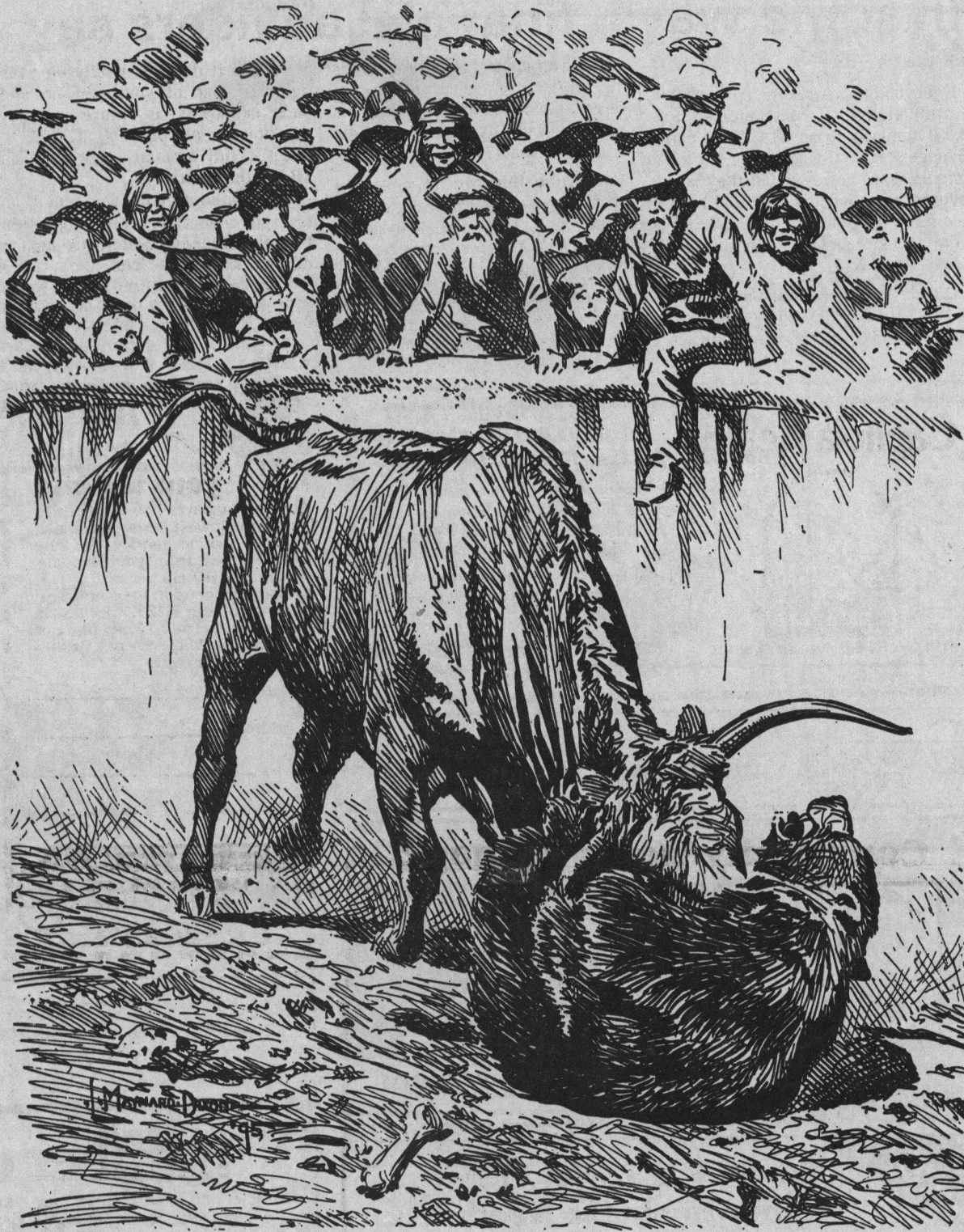
Things were going from bad to worse when a pirate invasion threatened the Mission in 1818. The padres fled over the mountains to Santa Clara, carrying what they could, and left the Mission in the hands of Villa authorities. The pirates landed at Monterey instead of Santa Cruz, and when the dust settled and the padres returned here, they found the Mission a shambles. The Villa people had made themselves at home, they had pilfered supplies and had even damaged Mission properties.

IN THE following years, a number of land grants was handed out to Branciforte families; their herds of animals thrived and grazed all over the place, including in pastures traditionally claimed by the Mission. Bitter property disputes followed. By 1823, there were about 120 heads of households in the Villa, including several English-speaking "foreigners," according to the late historian, Leon Rowland.

American trappers began arriving. In 1841 Peter Lassen, a Danish blacksmith, landed at the Villa and stayed in this area long enough to build the iron works for Isaac Graham's sawmill on Zayante Creek, the first powered sawmill in California.

Really, the Villa began to lose its separate identity in 1834 when Santa Cruz Mission was secularized, Americans arrived in greater numbers and the center of business grew up on the west side of the San Lorenzo.

Today, all that remains of the Villa, once Los Angeles and San Jose's "sister city," is its name, Branciforte, and the stone monument that marks its Plaza.



"A TERRIBLE FIGHT ENSUED"

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