

The Confessions of Old Chepa

By Geoffrey Dunn

Listen to me, mi hijo, I have a story to tell. The spirits of the wind and the sun are singing to me, hijo, and the coyote spirit is dancing. Oh, such a joyous world, but now, it lives only in my heart.

It is getting late, mi hijo, and I have such a long story to tell. It is the story of Santa Cruz before the *estranjeros*—the people of the mule spirit—came. Such a sacred place, this land of rivers, mountains and the sea.

I am an old woman, mi hijo, with skin of leather and breath of fire, but I am also very wise. Over eighty summers I have seen. The people of the town laugh at me now and the little children call me names. They do not see the spirit of the coyote dancing on my shoulder. We are dancing on the brink of the world, mi hijo, do not laugh at me. Such a long story to tell.

The year is 1889. On the sloping eastside banks of the San Lorenzo River, near the juncture of Branciforte and Water Streets, an old woman with a cane and satchel is beginning

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her daily journey through Santa Cruz. She is dressed in a tattered green wool sweater, a faded full-length skirt and leather sandals. Around her head is a red bandanna, holding back her long, gray strands of hair. Her eyes are as dark as polished ebony, and her skin is as rough as the bark of an oak. It is mid-morning as she descends the path to the footbridge which crosses the San Lorenzo and leads into town.

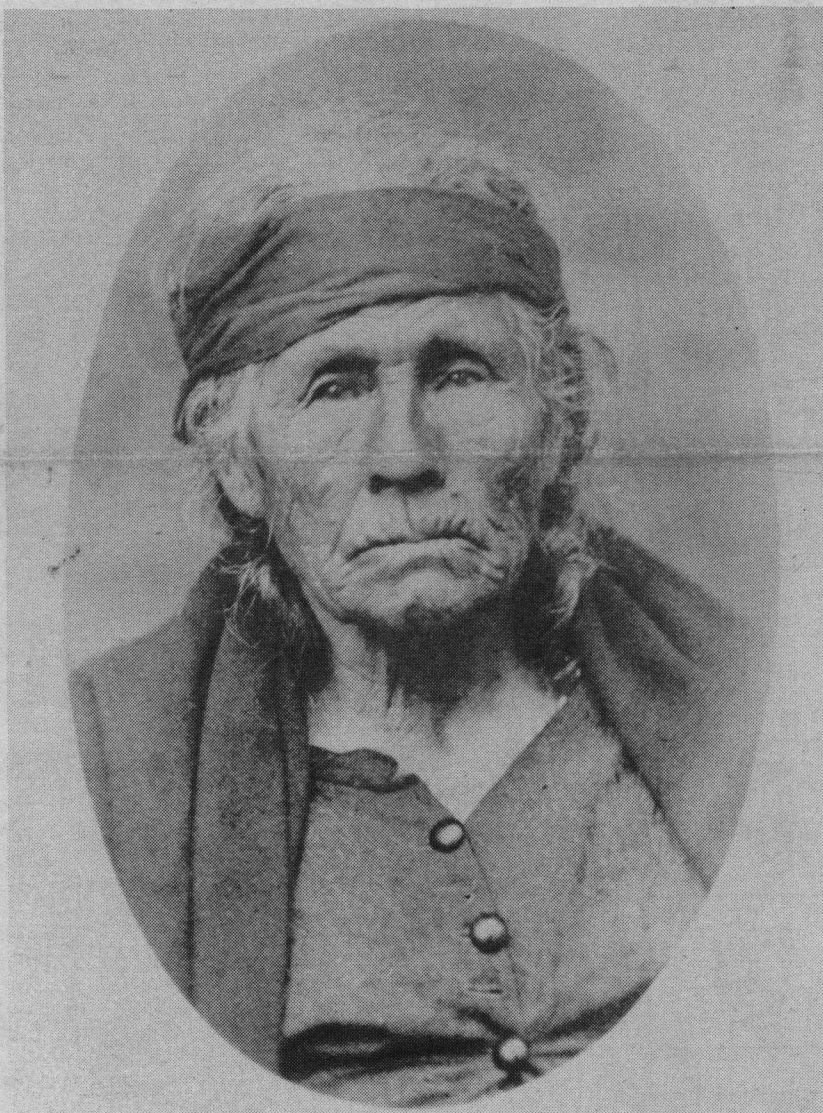
The old woman's real name is Josefa Pérez Soto, but the people of Santa Cruz call her "Old Chepa" (the "hunched one") or simply "mother." She is as familiar to the townspeople as the summer fog, and she greets each passerby with a friendly, if time-worn, "Buenos días."

To see her on her daily journey is to see a woman in dire poverty, bent and shriveled, but the merchants of Pacific Avenue have taken kindly to her plight. Each day they give to her freely meats and vegetables, corn meal and tobacco, and, perhaps, a shot of whiskey. With her satchel full, she makes her way back up the path to her small rustic cabin in the Villa de Branciforte, or what the whites in Santa Cruz call "Spanish Town." There, she rolls her tobacco in small strips of old newspaper and basks in the summer sun on the south side of her cabin. Perhaps one of her grandchildren will visit her, or maybe an old friend. If not, she is content to be alone.

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born into one of its oldest and more prominent Spanish families. In her eighties, if not nineties, she is nearly as old as the city itself—and she has lived here under four flags: those of Spain, Mexico, the California Republic and the United States. In many ways, her life and the history of nineteenth-century Santa Cruz are one and the same.

As the sun begins to set over the barren bluffs to the west, Josefa slowly finds her way into her cabin. Soon, a small fire is crackling, and some beans, salted meat and tortillas are ready to eat.



Josefa Pérez Soto was born in the Villa de Branciforte sometime in the early 1800s. Her father, José María Pérez, of Spanish and Indian blood, was a native of Jalisco, Mexico, and a soldier in the Spanish army. Her mother, Margarita Rodríguez, was the fifth daughter of José Antonio Rodríguez, a retired Spanish soldier who first arrived in Santa Cruz County in 1798.

The Santa Cruz Mission—the mission of the "holy cross"—was founded by Franciscan priests in 1791, the Spanish government granting to the mission vast tracts of land between the Pájaro River and Point Año Nuevo. Six years later, under orders from the Spanish Viceroy in Mexico City, a separate *villa* was established on the eastern banks of the San Lorenzo River, roughly a mile from the mission. A handful of local priests protested the establishment of a secularized settlement so close to their own, but to no avail. Never fulfilling its original economic expectations and

in need of regular subsidization, the *villa* stumbled into the nineteenth century inhabited by a growing number of *invalidos*, retired soldiers who had served ten or more years in the Spanish Army. By most accounts they were a coarse lot, prone to drinking and gambling, and content with the easy life that the rich local soils and congenial coastal climate afforded them. The priests at the Santa Cruz Mission, still offended by the presence of the *villa*, were outraged by the lazy behavior of the nearby *invalidos* and further accused them of coveting the young women at the mission. The tension between the two communities never ceased.

Nonetheless, a handful of the *invalidos* settled down with families and eventually became prosperous. José and Vincenta Rodríguez raised nine children, four of whom were later to receive land grants in the region from the Mexican government. Their eldest daughter, Margarita, married soldier José María Pérez, and they, too, settled in Branciforte. Josefa was their first child.

There were few women in the *villa* then, mi hijo, and when my mother broke water they brought in an old Indian woman from the mission. They had given her the name Jovita. It was she who brought me into this world. She placed water to my mother's lips and stroked her gently with the claw of a grizzly bear. It gave her strength.

When I was young, Jovita would come to the *villa* and care for us children when we were sick. Her eyes were like bright stars. She taught me the ways of her people, their dances and chants, their medicines and their holy visions. And the power of the sun.

As we grew older, we would play in the river. We would wade in it up to our knees and look for the brightest pebbles and give them names. The children from the mission, los inditos, would join us in the river, and we would play games together with the bright stones and chase the small green frogs in the shallows. I will tell you that they never touched the frogs.

I remember the summer that one of them died, and then four more, and then a dozen, and then there were no more. Not even Jovita could save them. That was el verano de la muerte, mi hijo, the summer of death, and I never played in the river again.

The mission across the river was a world separate and apart from young Josefa's. Established under the pretext of bringing God and prosperity to the native Ohlone population, the mission, in fact, differed little from the slave system of the American South. The Ohlones at the mission toiled long hours for little personal gain, their labor being expropriated for great wealth which went directly into the hands of the church. By 1830, the Santa Cruz Mission had accumulated over 3,600 head of cattle, 400 horses, large herds of sheep and swine, and \$25,000 worth of silver plate.

Later apologists for the mission would claim (and for that matter, continue to claim) that the native Ohlone had joined the church of their own free will, but that was hardly the case. Years after the mission had collapsed, a local

Ohlone was interviewed about his life in the mission. His Christian name was Lorenzo, and he told the following tale: "To capture the wild Indian, first were taken the children, and then the parents followed. The padres would erect a hut, and light the candles to say Mass, and the Indians, attracted by the light—thinking they were stars—would approach, and soon be taken." Lorenzo told further stories of "being severely treated by the padres." Lashings with rawhide straps were commonplace.

By the time Mexico declared its independence from Spain in 1833 and the missions were secularized, the Ohlone population at the Santa Cruz Mission had dropped from a high of 644 in 1798 to less than 250.

At night I would be awakened by loud shrieks, mi hijo, and at first I thought that they were coyotes in the fields. But they were not coyotes, no, and if I listened closely and the wind was blowing from the west, I could hear the cracks of the whip and the screams of pain that followed. Oh no, they were not coyotes. Even the little children would receive the whip, mi hijo, smaller than you, and we would see the welts on their backs as they worked in the fields, their heads beld down in shame.

One day in the river, before the summer of death, I heard the inditos tell the story of the murdered padre, Father Andrés Quintana, el padre malo, they called him. It was said he beat his disciples with the iron whip, tortured them, and that he took advantage of a young married Indian woman. Late one night, when the bad priest was alone, he was called from his quarters, beaten, then hung from a tree behind the mission hill. Before he died, those parts that held his manhood were cut away from his groin. His ghost still hangs from the tree behind the hill, blood dripping to the soil. All my life, mi hijo, I could never go back to the mission without seeing him, el padre malo, swaying there in the wind.

By the time she reached adolescence, Josefa Pérez had become a striking beauty and she was given the name "la más bonita de Santa Cruz." It was rumored that the popular song "The Maid of Monterey" was written in her honor.

Immediately following Mexico's declaration of independence from Spain, the newly established government granted large tracts of land to a handful of selected citizens. In Santa Cruz County, nearly twenty such grants were awarded, three of which went to Josefa's uncles, Francisco, José Antonio, and José de la Cruz Rodríguez and another to her cousin, Blas Escamilla. Together, the family's land holdings constituted thousands of acres, on which they ranched cattle, swine, horses and sheep. They were among the region's most prosperous residents, and their monthly rodeos, at which the men branded the cattle and rode wild broncs, were large, gala celebrations where the young and beautiful Josefa was the most sought-after partner for the evening dances.

Oh, I had fire in my eyes back then, mi hijo, and the men would stare, hoping to douse the flame. I could feel the beat of their wanting—my father said you could cut it with a knife—and my body would twist and pull to the rhythms of the music, but I never gave them what they wanted. I never even looked their way—not until I was ready.

In her early twenties, Josefa Pérez was married to Gervasio Soto, the son of a former mission official, and they settled above Powder Mill Flat, near the present site of Paradise Park up Highway 9. During the following decades, Josefa gave birth to seven children, four sons and three daughters.

By the mid-1840s, Santa Cruz was on the precipice of great change. Scores of Anglo settlers began moving into the county, many of them U.S. citizens bearing no loyalty to the government of Mexico.

In the spring of 1840, according to Leon Rowland's *The Annals of Santa Cruz*, José Castro, Prefect of Northern California and a cousin of the Santa Cruz Castro family, ordered that all *estranjeros*, or foreigners, be rounded up by local authorities. Such residents were taken to Monterey and placed on a ship to San Blas, Mexico, though within a year many had returned to the region. By the end of the decade, Santa Cruz was a hotbed of secessionist sentiments. With the coming of the Gold Rush, the days of Mexican rule were to be short lived.

In February of 1846, Lieutenant John C. Fremont and his "California Battalion," riding under the flag of the United States on what was then foreign soil, crossed over the Santa Cruz Mountains from Santa Clara. According to Fremont's diaries, his party camped for three nights on Thompson Flat (now the Graham Hill Showgrounds), across the river from the Soto family. Famished from their journey through the redwoods, Fremont's soldiers sought to regain their



Lynchings of Californios were commonplace during the mid-1800s—these two men were hung from the Water Street bridge in the 1870s

strength on the picturesque bluff overlooking Monterey Bay. Although caught in a torrential downpour, Fremont was able to secure enough supplies to resuscitate his troops. It was said that Josefa Soto brought food to the men, cooked for them, and cared for the sick. Later, she was briefly detained by Mexican authorities in Santa Clara on suspicion of being a spy. No charges were ever filed.

We could hear the soldiers coming across the mountains, the rumble of their horses and the singing. The first day we saw smoke rising from their campground, and then a party of two soldiers forged the river by horseback and arrived at my house. At first they demanded food, but when I denied them, they offered a gold coin in return. I was never to see that coin, mi hijo, never. It was late winter and I gathered what supplies I could and mounted the smaller of the two horses behind one of the soldiers. He joked about my womanhood in English to his companions, and though I could not understand the words, mi hijo, I understood just the same. They are all alike.

When we arrived at the camp, El Comandante Fremont approached me and offered me his tent. Question after question he asked, about roads and military supplies, rivers

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and ships. I pretended I did not understand. I did not trust him, El Comandante. His Spanish was very broken. He said he was here merely to make maps. He was a liar. He was here to exploit us. He had the look of death.

And then I was introduced to the troops. Many were sick and wounded from their journey. I could not let them die. I made a broth out of the herbs taught to me by Jovita when I was young, and nearly all were better by the following morning. They asked me to secure young girls from the villa for them, but I refused. I told them that they were not good enough. They laughed, but the truth is, they never were.

On the fourth morning, El Comandante Fremont bid me farewell. Instead of gold, he banded me a small locket of brass. He laughed and made a joke of me and mounted his horse. I threw the locket to the ground.

California was admitted to the union in 1850, and by then, Santa Cruz was swarming with newly arrived whites on the make. Those *Californios* of Spanish and Mexican heritage who still resided here were called "greasers" by the Anglos, and a new and ugly chapter in Santa Cruz history was about to unfold. For the next three decades, rapes and lynchings of *Californios* would become commonplace. The first such lynchings took place here as soon as California became a state and didn't end until 1877.

The California Census of 1852 indicates that Josefa Pérez Soto, by then a widow, had moved to Monterey with her younger children, where the atmosphere towards the old *Californios* was far more hospitable.

I knew they would never take me, but I was worried about my sons and my grandchildren. The night they came for the Hernandez boy, we could see the procession of torches leading up the hill to the jail. They took young Mariano and two others from their cells and left them hanging until noon of the next day. I tell you, mi hijo, the villa was never the same after that.

Sometime in the late 1860s or early 1870s, Josefa returned to Santa Cruz, where she resided with her eldest son, Ramon Soto, on East Water Street. After her son's death on January 20, 1885, she was forced to move into a log cabin near the present site of Branciforte Elementary School. Her youngest daughter, Carmen Soto Leggett, lived down the street. It was then that the strong-willed Josefa began her morning journey for supplies along Pacific Avenue.

Less than four months after her son's death, on May 3, 1885, the following item appeared in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*:

Old Chapa [*sic*] was so drunk Wednesday that she fell and lay in the middle of Church Street until Officer Tainton procured an express wagon and hauled her home. When it is remembered that this woman is nearly a hundred years old, it is a crying shame for anyone to give or sell her liquor.

Could they wonder why I drank, mi hijo. To be so poor and laughed at in the town of my birth was a great pain, a very great pain, mi hijo. And to bury my son, Ramon—the death of one's child, ah, that is another great pain to bear. The spirit water put death to that pain, such a miserable pain.

During the following years, Josefa was in and out of the County Hospital. In 1889, she was there for three months.

They put me in the white man's house of medicine, and I will tell you, it was no place to be. I had been taught the spirit medicine of the Ohlone as a young girl, and I had used it all my life. If you want to know the truth, I think they wanted me out of the way. I was a bent-up old woman, with the owl spirit in my heart, mi hijo, but the white man did not understand.

Scream? Of course, I screamed while I was in there. My dreams were frightening—evil spirits everywhere, the white walls and white linen. I will tell you, that was no place to die.

Josefa returned to her cabin and resumed her daily journeys downtown. Shortly thereafter, in the spring of 1890, she took ill again and was moved into the home of her daughter, Mrs. Leggett, on East Water Street. She died there—this woman who had lived under four flags and who had outlived her times—on the morning of May 17, 1890. Her funeral was held at Holy Cross Church, the site of the old mission.

A short obituary in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* referred to Josefa as "Mother Chapar" and declared: "Into her hands people have placed many ten-cent pieces, for she had a habit of asking for money. She could only speak a few words of English and observed to the last the quaint Mexican customs." A much longer and thorough obituary, undoubtedly written by the young reporter Ernest Otto, appeared in the *Santa Cruz Daily Surf* under the headline "Old Chapa: Death of a Local Character, Born with the Century."

"Although the year of her birth is surrounded by considerable obscurity," the *Surf* article declared, "it seems certain, at least, that she was a contemporary of the present nineteenth century, and was not less than 90 years old, possibly several years more." She is buried in the old mission cemetery, just northeast of the Catholic Church.

Come back to the hill of the mission, again, mi hijo, and I will dance for you as I did when I was young. And I will tell you more stories, many more stories. What a long life, mi hijo. So many stories to tell.

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