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DECONSTRUCTING ROXAS

BENEATH THE LAYERS OF MYSTERY SURROUNDING
JUSTINIANO ROXAS IS A TRUTH MOST OF
US WOULD RATHER NOT SEE

BY GEOFFREY DUNN

When I was a young boy in the early 1960s, my aunts would take me on Saturday mornings to the old Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery overlooking Arana Gulch, off Capitola Road Extension, on the border between Live Oak and Santa Cruz. We would gather bundles of fresh flowers and pay weekly respects to the family members who had passed before us.

I loved exploring the marbled mysteries and the names and dates associated with Santa Cruz history. Invariably, I would break away and visit an isolated burial site that fully captured my boyhood imagination, that of Justiniano Roxas, whose gravestone identified him as a "Santa Cruz Mission Indian" and who had lived to the astonishing age of "123 years."

Roxas and I had something of a unique relationship. My great-uncle, Malio Stagnaro, had always been called upon to play "Chief Roxas" (a title foisted on Justiniano in the 1950s by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors) in various local historical parades and pageants. I suppose there was something about his ruddy Italian complexion that suggested Malio for the role of Roxas, although historical accuracy wasn't, apparently, a high priority. Donning loincloth, headband, war paint and a Winchester rifle atop a chestnut steed, my great-uncle looked more like a Sioux brave straight out of Hollywood than anything resembling an actual California Indian. → 17

ME INDIAN The author's uncle, Malio Stagnaro, playing 'Chief Roxas' at the dedication of Henry Cowell Redwood State Park in 1954.

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Nevertheless, I felt a special blood kinship in my youth with Roxas—an “old Costanoan warrior,” as he was described by local historian Margaret Koch in a 1966 *Sentinel* article, now quietly resting, as she put it, in his “happy hunting grounds,” not more than a stone’s throw from my own family’s burial plot.

**WHEN THE PARTY ENTERED,
ROXAS WAS CROUCHED NEAR THE
FIRE, ‘DOUBLED ALMOST OVER
WITH HIS SKELETON HANDS
CLASPED IN FRONT OF HIM’
AND ‘HIS NAKED BROWN FEET,
LOOKING LIKE SMOKED HAMS’
NEARLY TOUCHING THE FLAMES.**

The Roxas Papers

Cut to a decade later. During my undergraduate years at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the 1970s, I was conducting research on microfiche rolls of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* when I discovered a stunning, absolutely remarkable article titled “Old Times Roxas,” dated Dec. 27, 1873, with a series of subheadlines underneath it:

THE OLDEST INHABITANT ON THE EARTH.

A MAN AGED 121 YEARS.

A LIVING TRIBUTE TO THE CLIMATE OF
SANTA CRUZ.

The article stretched on for more than 2,000 words, exceptionally long for a newspaper of that period, and it also included an even more exceptional woodblock print, albeit rough, of Roxas seated in a chair. He looked shriveled and forlorn—a far cry from the image I had in my head from Uncle Malio’s portrayal of Roxas, brave and upright on his spirited mount.

The journalistic description of Roxas and his living conditions was even more horrifying. The writer (unnamed) had gone to visit Roxas, accompanied by a “Dr. Dryer” and by Father Joaquin Adam (who had played a central role in discovering Roxas’ age) to the County Hospital, then located on Mission Hill (near the present

site of the Holy Cross Church) and run by the Sisters of Charity.

Roxas’ room was described as a “small, narrow one.” When the party entered, Roxas was crouched near the fire, “doubled almost over with his skeleton hands clasped in front of him” and “his naked brown feet, looking like smoked hams,” nearly touching the flames.

The writer noted that Roxas paid no attention to his visitors, but moved even closer to the fire as they approached. Father Adams placed his hands on Roxas’ shoulders, at which point the old man “commenced jabbering rapidly in Spanish to the Father—shaking his head at every word.”

The *Sentinel* article provided a detailed physical description of Roxas, abundant in metaphor:

Roxas is about as destitute of flesh as a skeleton. . . . The skin is yellow, hard, full of creases, and looks like parchment. His little grey eyes were gummy and repulsive. . . . Altogether, Roxas looks like a mummy summoned from the cold precincts of the grave to mock humanity.

Perhaps most significantly, the story documented how Father Adams had located in the Santa Cruz Mission records—*Libre de Bautismos, No. 1*—the baptism of Roxas on March 4, 1792, by Father Isidro Salazar, who declared:

I solemnly baptize a man of about 40 years of age belonging to a ranch, whom I name Justiniano Roxas now.

Father Adam, according to the article, had taken “some pains to investigate the matter” and there was “no doubt” as to Roxas’ age and identity. “The testimony on this point,” the *Sentinel* asserted, “is conclusive.”

So significant was this discovery that local photographer Edward Payson Butler, proprietor of the Pioneer Gallery at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Locust Street, was commissioned to take a portrait of Roxas, a copy of which was sent to the Vatican, where it was received “with interest.”

Little Big Story

The story of 121-year-old Justiniano

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Roxas went international, and excerpts from the *Sentinel* account appeared throughout the United States and in English-language newspapers as far away as Australia. Roxas very quickly became a legend in his own time.

Less than a year later, on Sept. 5, 1874, the *Sentinel* issued a follow-up story, noting that a second local photographer, John Elijah Davis Baldwin, owner of the Star Gallery, also on Pacific Avenue, had been commissioned to take yet another portrait of Roxas, now 122 years old, which was also intended to be sent to the Vatican, as a gift for Pope Pius IX.

"If he can only grin at death and hold out for another two years," the *Sentinel* noted, "he may be sent to the Centennial Exposition as a specimen of California longevity."

Roxas was not able to hold the grin. On March 13, 1875, the *Sentinel* published headlines, "Roxas Is No More." "The lamp of life" had gone out for Roxas three days earlier. He was credited with being 123 years of age at the time of his death. Father Adams had delivered the final sacraments.

An "impressive" High Mass of Christian Burial was held at Holy Cross Church, according to the *Sentinel* account, and Roxas "was bore to the grave amid a large concourse of citizens and spectators."

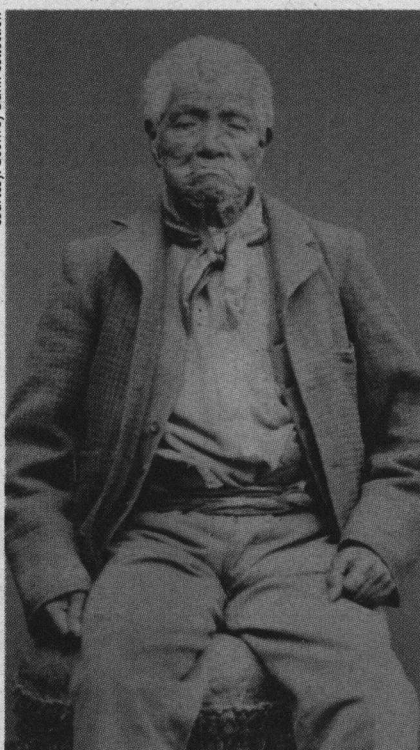
If Roxas became a local legend in his own lifetime, in his afterlife, his legend extended to truly mythic proportions.

**'HE LIVED IN POVERTY UNTIL HE DIED, AND HAVING BEEN TAKEN TO A PORTRAIT STUDIO TO HAVE A PHOTO TAKEN IN A NICE SUIT DID NOT CHANGE A THING'
—HISTORIAN ROBERT JACKSON**

Harper's Weekly, the premier national magazine of its day, carried a finely rendered lithograph of Roxas—similar to the woodcut that had appeared in the original *Sentinel* account—with a story drawn largely from the *Sentinel* obituary.

Four years later, in 1879, Roxas was celebrated in Wallace W. Elliot's *Illustrations of Santa Cruz County*. Yet another lithograph of Roxas—this time a full-page rendition, with Roxas holding a walking stick and noted as having been rendered "from a photograph by Baldwin"—gave Roxas a fuller and healthier look of respectability that he did

Courtesy: Geoffrey Dunn Collection



LONG IN THE TOOTH Centenarian natives were popular newspaper subjects. 'Old Gabriel' of Salinas was said to be 151 years old at the time of his death in 1890, a year after this photo was taken.

not have in the earlier graphic iterations. (The gentlemanly image is on the cover of this week's paper.)

In 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a painting of Roxas executed by none other than Father Adams—and which hangs to this day in the Mission Santa Cruz Reliquary—was exhibited in the south gallery of the California Building.

But Roxas' biggest days were still to come. Led by Margaret Koch, the matriarch of Santa Cruz historians during the mid-20th century, Roxas was declared a "Chief" by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. Koch included a section on Roxas in her book, *Santa Cruz County: Parade of the Past*, and used the Elliot lithograph as an illustration in her book. "Chief" Roxas had been claimed by the 20th century.

Rinsing Off the Whitewash

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of local historians

began re-examining much that had been previously written about local history. In particular, the romanticized view of California mission life and its impact on California Indians was significantly challenged.

In the mid-1970s, Carolyn Swift, my friend and former colleague at the long-defunct *Cabrillo Times and Greensheet*, discovered the Edward Payson Butler photograph of Roxas in the archives in the Santa Cruz Library. It matched the image of the woodprint in the original 1873 *Sentinel* article as well as the lithograph in *Harper's Weekly*.

Swift noted that the Butler photograph contrasted sharply with the reigning image of Roxas used by Koch and others—the 1879 Elliot lithograph. In the lithograph, Roxas had much fuller features, looked old, but well-fed, and his clothing was of a much finer ilk. The Butler photograph, Swift noted, “tells a different story about Justiniano Roxas and conditions of his life”—and provided “an interesting contrast between how people wanted to view treatment of Indians” in the 1870s and “the reality that actually existed.”

The written record also yielded new information. In the mid-1980s, Robert H. Jackson, a young bilingual scholar conducting in-depth research on California Mission records, including Mission Santa Cruz, made a most startling discovery: the “Justiniano Roxas” baptized in 1792 actually died in April of 1808, more than likely in his late 50s. His son, also named Justiniano, died in 1816 at the grand age of 20.

Kaboom! So much for “The Oldest Inhabitant on the Earth” and “the Living Tribute to the Climate of Santa Cruz.”

In an article titled “The Roxas Hoax: Uprooting the Myth of ‘The Oldest Man in the World’” that appeared in the November 1986 issue of the history journal, *The Californians*, Jackson carefully traced the lineage of the Rosas family (spelled with an “s,” not an “x”) and conclusively debunked the myth of Justiniano’s age. Case closed. Conclusively.

Moreover, Jackson pointed out that two complete censuses for the Indian population at Santa Cruz Mission were taken in 1834 and again in 1845—and that there were no listings for a “Justiniano Roxas” or anything approximating that name in either.

Two images ran with the article: the Butler photograph discovered by Carolyn Swift; and the Elliot lithograph. The two images were presented side by side, with the caption: “Justiniano Roxas, ‘the 123-year-old man,’ before and after his picture was touched up by Santa Cruz boosters to conceal his miserable indigence.”

The Roxas myth had been busted—flat-out destroyed. And there was evidence of a cover-up. Roxasgate.

Mysteries and Histories

Or so it seemed. Last year, when my friend Peggy Townsend told me that she was editing a new publication, *Santa Cruz Magazine*, and wanted me to contribute a regular history column, I jumped at the chance. My first choice for the inaugural issue was an article titled “The Many Myths of Justiniano Roxas.”

The story apparently struck a nerve. Like others, I had pointed out the contrast between the Butler photo and the Elliot lithograph. “It was an upgrade fashioned by Santa Cruz boosters ardently intent on promoting local tourism and real estate during the era when the first railroads roared into the burgeoning beach town,” I wrote.

I received comments of gratitude from longtime Santa Cruzans who had either never heard of Roxas or who had never heard of the debunking, and from more recent arrivals who had never heard of Roxas at all.

But there was one email that was not congratulatory. It came from someone I had known since my high school days and who had been something of an adversary in recent years. I shall call him Mr. X. Like me, he had grown up in Santa Cruz County and had a love for local history, and especially of historic photographs. He and I often competed on eBay for local images, and there had been an edge to our most recent interactions.

The subject of the email was titled: “J. Roxas, another view.” Mr. X challenged the “cleaned up” Elliot lithograph thesis that several local historians, including myself, had promulgated. He was offended that Father Adams’ integrity had been challenged and that he had been implicated in a conspiracy, of sorts, to alter the historical record.

“Elliot’s (Fr. Adams) caption states that the lithograph is based on a photo by Baldwin,” Mr. X wrote. “Just suppose the caption is correct . . . Father Adams seems vilified. What leads to this conclusion? . . . I say poppycock to this old exploitive lithograph theory.”

He signed his missive: “A Roxas fan.”

We engaged in an intense discussion, but certainly not pleasantries. At times Mr. X was direct and at other times circumspect and convoluted. And then I sensed that he was holding something back from me.

Just suppose the caption is correct.

The only possible way he could imagine such a supposition, I realized, was if he had a copy of the Baldwin photograph. I was in absolutely no mood for any more games. I cut off further discussion.

Then, more than six months after our initial flurry of Roxas emails, I received a remarkable bit of correspondence from Mr. X in which he acknowledged that he had

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Photo by Edward Payson Butler, Courtesy of Santa Cruz Public Library



WILL THE REAL ROXAS PLEASE REMAIN SEATED

This 1873 photo of Justiniano Roxas was the source of the lithograph that appeared in Harper's Weekly. Its contrast to the comparatively dapper image on the cover of this newspaper has prompted some speculation that the second one was doctored.

resentments and what I perceived to be bitterness about the local history scene. There was a lot of water under the bridge.

After 15 minutes or so he got up and went to a plastic container and pulled out a *carte de visite*. CDVs, as they became commonly known in the 19th century, were developed in France, made of an albumen print on thin paper and then mounted on a thicker paper card, roughly 2 by 3 1/2 inches.

The CDV produced by John Elijah Davis Baldwin in 1874 was absolutely pristine. It had an amber luster to it and the image of Roxas was clear and perfectly defined.

And it was a near-exact match of the Elliot lithograph.

The period between the first and second photo clearly had been good to Roxas. His face was fuller in the Baldwin photo than it had been in the earlier Butler image, his clothes of finer quality. And it proved conclusively that the Elliot lithograph had not been "upgraded" by local "boosters" intent on promoting the local economy. I had been wrong. The Baldwin photograph was clearly a "smoking gun."

I asked Mr. X if I could use the photograph in my upcoming *Metro Santa Cruz* article.

"No," he said. "Not now."

I was disappointed, but not surprised. He did, however, gift me with a beautiful photograph of my grandfather, Cottardo Stagnaro, brother of Malio, mending nets on the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, circa 1930. It was a photograph I did not have.

No Romance

Through the wonders of the Internet, I tracked down Robert H. Jackson, who had originally cracked the Roxas-age hoax in the 1980s. He was living outside the country.

purchased the Baldwin photo of Roxas in an eBay auction in October of 2000.

I was right. He had had it all along. The image, he said, matched that of the Elliot lithograph—he described it as "an honest depiction." He also added an obscure, though telling, line: "Revealing the *carte de visite* is giving up a secret."

I thanked him for the info, but I also asked if that meant he wasn't going to make the photograph public?

"I can show it to you," Mr. X responded, "but I'm not now making copies."

Hoax Squared

This past spring, I came across a reference to Roxas on the Internet and decided to query my editor at *Metro Santa Cruz* about the Roxas story. She gave me a deadline. It provided me an excuse to contact Mr. X about seeing the Baldwin *carte de visite*. More importantly, I had always wanted to contact Robert H. Jackson, the historian who had broken the Roxas hoax; I had long been a fan of his work.

First, I called Mr. X. We set a time and place to meet. It was mostly productive. I began to understand some of his

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Courtesy: The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley



SEEN IT ALL Maria Rodriguez was reportedly 115 years old in 1889. She claimed to have been present at the building of the Santa Barbara Mission.

Jackson had been raised for part of his childhood in Santa Cruz County. He attended Cabrillo College and had graduated in 1980 from UCSC, where his senior thesis was titled “An Introduction to the Historical Demography of Santa Cruz Mission and the Villa de Branciforte.” He received his Ph.D. from UC-Berkeley in 1988.

Since then he has become one of the world’s leading experts on Spanish colonialism and has published several books on the subject, including *The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians*, with Edward Castillo, and *Race, Caste and Status: Indians in Colonial Spanish America*.

I told him about the discovery of the Baldwin photo. He acknowledged it was interesting, but that it did not change the overall story.

“Roxas was one of a small number of survivors divested of their birthright,” Jackson wrote me. “He lived in poverty until he died, and having been taken to a portrait studio to have a photo taken in a nice suit did not change a thing.”

Jackson, of course, was right. By focusing on the minutiae of history, we sometimes forget the bigger picture. Indeed, that is a problem with much of what we call “local history.”

At the time of European encounter, there were upward of 300,000 native people living in what is now California. Indeed, California was the most densely populated region in what was to become the continental United States. The mission

system imposed by Franciscan missionaries on the native populations was a brutal institution of colonial exploitation designed to extract labor surpluses from California’s natives—including Roxas—in support of a global Spanish empire. There was nothing romantic about it.

While a substantial percentage of California Indians had been wiped out by the mission system, many survived well beyond California statehood in 1850. There were concentrated military and vigilante campaigns directed at California’s surviving Indians into the 1870s, culminating with the U.S. Army campaign against Kintpuash (Capt. Jack) of the Modoc tribe that led to his capture and hanging in 1873—the same year Roxas had been discovered by a *Sentinel* reporter.

Those California Indians who survived in urban areas during this era were viewed as curiosities—or what anthropologists like to call “other.”

As it turned out, there were several “Old” Indians discovered in various communities during this time period. In Salinas there was “Old Gabriel,” who, it was claimed, lived to be 151; there was “Old Calopina” in Tuolumne County; “Old Maria” in Santa Barbara; “Old Cassiano” at Mission San Antonio; ad infinitum. Santa Cruz even had a second centenarian named “Telos.”

In their impoverished and destitute states around California, there needed to be some explanation for the plight of these native elders. Centenarian status proved to be a viable and dignified explanation. They were all photographed and their CDVs were collected like baseball cards.

Of course, the indigenous people who were championed as centenarians assumed false identity upon false identity. It was more than a hoax; it was an alibi. The ruse became a convenient way to whitewash 100 years of California genocide.

There can be no doubt that the elderly Santa Cruz gentleman who was photographed by Butler in 1873 and Baldwin in 1874 was not Justiniano Roxas. He was not 120-plus years old. He was probably not even a native of Santa Cruz County.

Then who was he?

Jackson told me that when he was going over detailed mission census reports from the 1830s, he discovered a Yokuts Indian from the Central Valley at the Santa Cruz Mission named “Ustiano,” who may have been the later “Justiniano Roxas.”

Or maybe not. We will never know for sure. In my own head, Roxas will always remain a legend wrapped in an enigma played in the cosmic cavalcade of history by my great-uncle Malio, an Italian fishmonger, who is buried in the new Holy Cross Cemetery, just down the road from the man who was saddled with the name “Justiniano Roxas” the last two years of his life. ☐