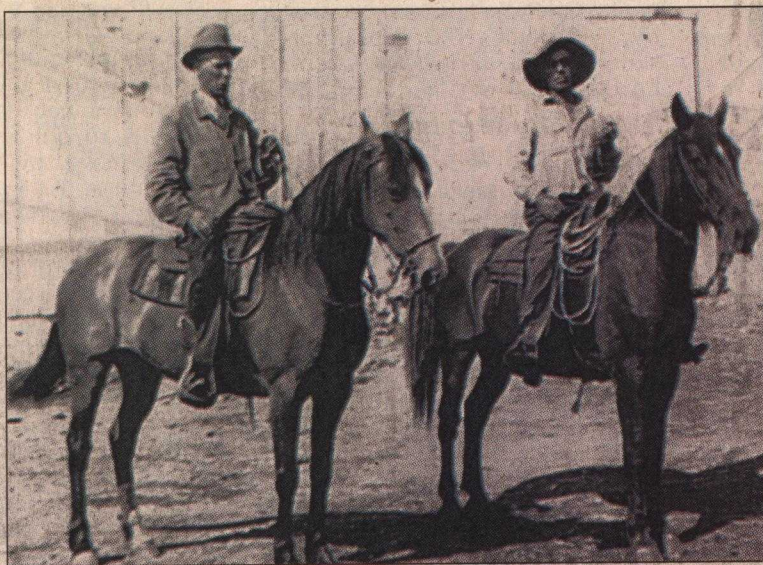


Bicentennial exhibit recalls rowdy founders of Branciforte



Jesus Maria Lorenzana, left, and his brother, Jorge, show off a pair of speedy-looking steeds. Spanish settlers in Villa Branciforte used to race horses up and down what is now Branciforte Avenue.

SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS



JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS

The new Villa Branciforte display at the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz brings back the wild times of the Spanish colony.

Celebrating a checkered history

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
Mercury News Staff Writer

It's bicentennial time on the Eastside of Santa Cruz.

Villa de Branciforte, known these days as the Eastside and originally one of only three secular pueblos in Spanish Alta California, is quietly celebrating its 200th anniversary.

Unlike the fiestas and fandangos favored by the region's first rowdy inhabitants, there'll be no grizzly-bear-baiting, no betting on pony races, no stabbing, shooting, looting or sacking and hopefully but a minimum of drunken fist-cuffs.

There will, however, be a series of exhibits, historical walking tours and symposiums at the Museum of Art and History beginning this weekend to mark the bicentennial.

These days, that area east of the San Loren-

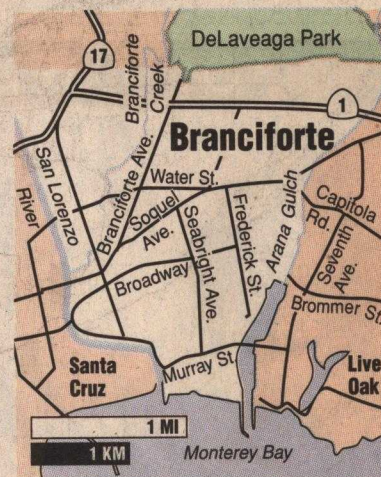
"If they say Branciforte's the failure, I think they've got it backwards."

— Sandy Lydon, historian

zo River is a mix of middle-class bungalows and working-class apartments.

But two centuries ago it was a different story. It had to be, considering that the Spanish bureaucracy in charge of California had rounded up a crew of jailbirds and vagrants to join a handful of retired soldiers sent to populate the new settlement on the eastern banks of the San Lorenzo. Subsequent immigrants

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MERCURY NEWS

Branciforte area has shady history

■ BRANCIFORTE

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included even meaner felons, paroled from Mexican prisons. Spain, trying to fend off British colonization from the north, was in a hurry to establish its own settlements.

California Gov. Diego de Borica signed papers in 1797 naming the new settlement after Miguel de la Grúa Talamanca, Marques de Branciforte, the Spanish viceroy who oversaw New Spain from his palace in Mexico City. Construction of the rude dwellings that were home to the motley group of settlers didn't get underway until the following year.

Just six years after its establishment, the Villa de Branciforte was already getting a bad reputation with the Spanish bigwigs in Mexico. Unlike the other two civilian pueblos, San Jose and Los Angeles, Branciforte was not prospering. In fact, it was suffering from a lack of provisions and from inattention from the bureaucrats.

The city fathers — there were virtually no women — were of little help. The behavior of the roughneck population led Comandante José Guerra Noriega in 1803 to fire off a letter to the governor complaining the locals weren't "so bad as other convicts sent to California; still ... their absence for a couple of centuries at a distance of a million leagues would prove most beneficial" to the rest of the region.

One of the big problems, local historian Sandy Lydon notes, is that the pueblo was built illegally close to nearby Mission Santa Cruz. The padres west of the river had already appropriated all the best farmland and had dibs on trade up and down El Camino Real.

Temptation kept at bay

Spain's Laws of the Indies were designed, among other things, to protect indigenous peoples from the temptations that civilians might provide so the Indians could instead reap the "benefits" of life under the Fran-

BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

"The Romance of the Bells: The California Missions in Art," is but one of several programs and exhibits at the Museum of Art and History, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz, marking the bicentennial of the founding of Villa de Branciforte.

This display of California Impressionist paintings from the early 1900s is being shown through Nov. 23. For more information call the museum at (408) 429-1964.

Other events include:

- A display of Spanish silk shawls, some dating back to California's rancho days.
- Branciforte stories: An exhibit of photos, branding irons and other items that tell the story of the community and its early residents. This show runs through next June.
- A discussion of old documents about Branciforte and its relationship with the mission across the river in Santa Cruz. The discussion will be from 10 a.m. until noon Saturday at the museum. A walking tour of the Old Holy Cross Cemetery will get under way an hour later.
- Two symposiums to discuss the Spanish empire and a special edition of the Santa Cruz County History Journal featuring articles about Villa de Branciforte. The first symposium is at 7 p.m. Oct. 17. The second event will begin at 1 p.m. Oct. 18, with a chance to meet the journal's authors, followed by the symposium at 2:30 p.m.
- A fandango featuring demonstrations of adobe brick-making, tortilla-making and other early California crafts and occupations starts at noon Oct. 19.
- A tour of Evergreen Cemetery at 4 p.m. Oct. 25.

Source: Museum of Art and History

ciscans at the missions. So civilian communities were required to be sited far from the native neophytes at the missions.

The "Boys of Branciforte," as historian Lydon calls the Villa's populace, whiled away their time — raising cattle and committing high crimes and misdemeanors — until 1818, when a colorful revolutionary-cum-privateer named Hypolite de Bouchard sailed into Monterey Bay. The Argentine was cruising along the California coast trying to foment rebellion against the Spanish crown. Once de Bouchard realized that the good people of Monterey were not ready to join his insurgency, he burned their city to the ground.

When the padres at Mission Santa Cruz learned of the attack they gathered together a few belongings and Indian converts and fled across the hill to the missions of the Santa Clara Valley.

There are two versions of the response of the Boys of Branciforte to the temporary abandonment of the mission.

Mission raid

Lydon says they crossed the San Lorenzo and did what they were good at: They sacked and looted the mission.

Local historian Phil Reader says mission Padre Ramon Olbes asked Joaquin Buelna, *comisionado* of Branciforte, to remove the valuables left behind and store them until the priests returned, but "a group of ruffians broke into the mission storehouse and made off with some of the goods."

Soon Spain's dominion in the New World ended and California became an outpost of the newly independent Mexico. But, Lydon says, Yankees started to move into Santa Cruz in the 1840s and quickly grabbed the best farmland near the mission on the west side of the river. Gradually, he says, Mexicans and Indians were forced east of the river.

"By the 1850s," says the historian, "most of the Spanish-speaking people lived east of the San Lorenzo. The Yankees had even Anglicized the name of Mission Santa Cruz to Holy Cross Church.

Branciforte remained a rough-and-tumble community, and

wasn't annexed to Santa Cruz until 1905, almost a half-century after the city was officially chartered.

The place was so tough, says Reader, that most of the good photographs of Branciforte residents from the latter half of the 19th century are not the traditional family snapshots favored by historians — they're mug shots from the files at San Quentin Prison.

Branciforte landmarks

Today, a street, a rural road, a creek and a branch library bear the name of the old pueblo, as do an elementary school and a junior high.

A few other reminders of Villa de Branciforte's colorful history remain:

■ The old Lorenzana adobe at Branciforte Avenue and Goss Street provides one of the last examples of colonial-era architecture.

■ A state historical marker in front of Branciforte Elementary School declares that the site was "the center of Villa de Branciforte."

■ Branciforte Avenue — known to old-timers as "B-40" — was the race track where locals would bet on fast horses and skilled riders.

■ The county's 1960s-era courthouse and government center at the edge of the San Lorenzo River is the spot where the Boys of Branciforte whiled away the time by pitting grizzly bears against ornery bulls. Grizzlies were a common problem for local residents in the early days.

Historians generally agree that of the three civilian Spanish settlements in California, Branciforte was the only failure. Reader lays much of the blame on the Yankees who settled across the San Lorenzo, who were far too disturbed by the values and lifestyles of the Spanish-speaking residents east of the river.

"A case can be made," Reader says, "... that if left to its own devices, Branciforte would have been every bit as successful as San Jose and Los Angeles."