

Rafael Castro's Rancho Aptos was Oldest Land Grant to Remain Under Mexican Ownership

By Jim Johnson

Castro Family Was Among Few to Retain Land Grants When Yankees Took Over California

Santa Cruz County, like California, underwent a massive transformation in the mid-19th century as the Mexican government turned over control of the territory to the United States. Within a few decades, California communities, like Santa Cruz, were transformed from traditional Mexican-style villas to Yankee-dominated towns.

Many of the old, original Spanish-Mexican families, dubbed Californios, lost their land in California during this time, because the records regarding these huge land grants were often found to be incomplete or inaccurate by American authorities.

But, Rafael Castro of Rancho Aptos was among the lucky land owners, managing to retain his claim to the land grants he had secured years earlier from Mexican authorities by keeping copies of his records. Rafael's status as a community leader, he had served as alcalde or mayor, and his education, rare in those times among the large Californio landowners, helped him keep his property.

"[The] Ranchos that went before him were [unable to prove their titles]," Aptos Museum Director John Hibble said. "His ranch was the oldest to successfully prove its title."

Rafael was a proud man who refused to speak English. He would emerge as a traditional Californio island amidst a swirling American river spurred on by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. His sister Martina was considerably less fortunate.

Even though she retained her claim to her vast Rancho Soquel lands just to the north of her brother, her holdings were all gone in a matter of years. Most of Martina's land was first divided among her children. Most of her daughters had Yankee husbands.

Shortly afterward, buffeted by lawsuits and the onset of mental instability, she sold her remaining land and spent her last years living with one of her daughters.

The Last of the Californio Aristocracy

The Castros were natural targets in the transmuting California of the mid-1800s. They represented everything that California had been up to that point in its history, a Mexican state dominated by large landowners from the Californio aristocracy.

The Castros had been a leading family in the Santa Cruz area for years before they received their huge chunks of land from Governor Jose Figueroa in 1833. Mexico had just gained its independence from Spain in 1812, and the Act of Secularization (1833) had just replaced the Catholic Church's authority with that of the Mexican government.

Rafael, who had served in the Mexican Army, received about 5,500 acres running from the Sanjon de Borregas or Lamb's Gulch near where Cabrillo College is today, to the outskirts of La Selva Beach.

The grant ran from the sea to about two and a half miles inland. He received another 1,100-plus acres in 1840.

Martina and her second husband, Michael Lodge, an Irishman who became a naturalized Mexican citizen, were granted about 1,700 acres running from the Sanjon de Borregas to the Soquel River in 1833. In 1844, she was granted a huge 32,000-plus acre addition, which stretched up to Loma Prieta, known as the Soquel Augmentation.

Bad Blood with the Yankees

There was also some bad blood between the Castro family and the Yankee population. Clusters of Yankees were already living in the Santa Cruz area in the early 1800s. In 1836, a contingent of the Yankees, led by Isaac Graham and known as rifleros, had actually joined a small army of Californios led by Jose Castro, a cousin of Rafael and Martina, in an effort to establish California as a free and sovereign state.

Graham and his Yankee rifleros were promised land in exchange for their help. But Graham and his rifleros, along with other Yankees around the state, believed their Californio compatriots never lived up to the bargain and made threats. In answer, Jose Castro ordered the Yankees arrested and taken to San Blas for trial.

The Yankees were returned without facing charges, but the seeds of discontent had been planted. In the early 1840s, Yankees began arriving in California in increasing numbers, a development noted by the Mexican Congress with concern.

By 1846, Americans had occupied California and an American flag was raised over Monterey. As the Mexican-American War rocked California (1846-48), Yankees moved into local government and were elected to the posts of mayor. In 1847, Santa Cruz alcalde William F. Blackburn, a Yankee, was named acting Governor of California.

In 1848, Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the war and turning California over to the U.S. that same year, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill and the Gold Rush was on. Yankees poured into the new U.S. territory. In 1850, California was admitted to the Union. Under state and federal control, a Land Commission was set up to review land ownership.

First the state, then the federal government, required all landowners to provide proof of ownership.

"Unless they had copies of their own records, the records at Sacramento or San Francisco had a way of not being complete," Hibble said.

Without copies of their records, and not understanding much English, Mexican landowners were forced to hire lawyers to represent them in an attempt to reclaim their land. In exchange, the lawyers charged them half to a third of their land for their services.

Castro Made Money Off the Invading Forces

According to Hibble, most large landowners lost their land through the process. Though Rafael had the foresight to keep copies of all records regarding Rancho Aptos and didn't need to hire a lawyer to keep his land, he watched as his fellow Mexicans lost their land and were mistreated by the newcomers. Until his death in 1878, Rafael bitterly resented the Yankee invasion and resisted being assimilated into the new culture.

"He got to see his heritage treated very poorly," Hibble said. "The Yankees mistreated the Californios, called them greasers or lynched them. He was bitter when he died."

But, Rafael also made money off the Yankees. He leased them his land and allowed them to build on it for various business endeavors, with the provision that at the end of the standard 10-year lease he would retain all buildings on his property. Because of these contracts, Rafael acquired a lumber mill, a gristmill, a sawmill, and the Aptos Wharf.

Rafael also made a tidy profit from selling large parts of his land in 1872 to sugar king Claus Spreckels, who bought most of what is now Rio Del Mar from the aging Mexican don.

Although Rafael's sister Martina also rented her land to Yankees, such as Frederick Hihn and Benjamin Porter, she was one of the Californios caught in the Yankee current. She lost her second husband and three of her children in the Gold Rush.

Martina's Misfortunes

Michael Lodge and Martina had gone to the Stanislaus River to ply for gold. Martina returned after three of her children fell sick and died. Lodge never returned and was presumed murdered in a dispute over gold. Martina, who could not read or write in English, found herself poorly equipped to deal with the Yankees.

Several of her daughters married Yankees, including Thomas Fallon, a veteran of the Texas War for Independence and the Mexican-American War. In 1849, Martina, at 42, married Louis Depeaux, a man 16 years younger than she was. It was rumored that Depeaux was actually more interested in Martina's daughters than in her.

Then, in the early 1850s, with her Rancho Soquel land grant before the Land Commission, Martina was sued by several of her daughters and their Yankee husbands, led by Fallon, for most of her land. Soon afterward, Depeaux left without telling Martina where he was going.

Martina eventually gave each of her remaining eight children one-ninth of her Rancho Soquel. She kept an 1,100-acre parcel and her home near where the Soquel Cemetery sits today. Martina's Rancho Soquel lands would be the subject of court battles for the rest of the 19th century and into the early 20th century.

Meanwhile, Depeaux returned, and he and Martina sold her remaining Rancho Soquel land to Catholic Father John Llebaria and Rev. John Ingoldsby for \$2,000, and the Soquel Augmentation for \$500 to Archbishop Joseph Alemany and Ingoldsby, in 1855. Martina had planned to go to Mexico after the sale but decided to go to the Hawaiian Islands instead.

During the trip, Martina said she stated hearing voices and having hallucinations. In 1856, she returned to California and spent several months in the Stockton Insane Asylum. After her release from the asylum, Martina spent her last years with her daughter Guadalupe in Capitola until her death in 1890.

Sources

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