

the way we were

BY AUGUSTA FINK

History

PAMPHLET

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The Settling of Santa Cruz

Soldiers, Friars, Convicts and Rancheros

Struggling through thick underbrush and across steep ravines, members of the Portola expedition found themselves engulfed by a forest of strange, towering red trees. One of the officers wrote in his journal: "They were the largest, highest and straightest trees that we had ever seen." To the men of the party, lost and plagued by illness, the darkly wooded mountains were oppressive and forbidding. Finally, emerging from the redwoods, they crossed a river (which they named the San Lorenzo) swollen with rain water and, on Oct. 18, 1769, stood on the site of present-day Santa Cruz. Then they forged ahead in their futile search for Monterey Bay, which they had passed and failed to recognize.

Though the Santa Cruz site was ideally located for a settlement, it was 22 years before a mission was founded there, on Aug. 28, 1791 — the same year that the Mission Soledad was established. The

fledgling endeavor enjoyed an auspicious start, with good climate, fertile soil, and amenable Indians. But soon a series of misfortunes descended upon the friars.

First came word that the government intended to establish a pueblo across the river, not more than gunshot distance from the mission. Immediately the padres were apprehensive that the settlers of the town would not only encroach upon their land but might also adversely influence their Indian neophytes. Their worst fears were realized.

The purpose of the pueblo, a brainchild of the Marques de Branciforte, Viceroy of New Spain, was to shore up California's defenses against the threat of British or Russian incursions from the north. Originally the plan was to populate the settlement with retired soldiers from Mexico, who would be available for military service in case of emergency. But all efforts to

recruit that type of settler failed. Not a single ex-soldier could be found willing to immigrate to an unknown frontier. Ultimately the first group of colonists rounded up to inhabit the pueblo, named Villa de Branciforte in honor of the viceroy, comprised nine convicted criminals and their families.

Destitute and sick, some suffering from syphilis, they arrived in Monterey on May 12, 1797. After being supplied with a few tools, oxen, and a couple of carts, they proceeded to their destination adjacent to the Mission Santa Cruz. There they hastily erected crude huts, constructed of poles and mud, and settled down to a life of indolence and mischief. Their rowdy behavior and immorality scandalized the padres, who were forced to use sterner disciplinary methods in order to keep their Indian charges away from the troublemakers. Eventually these harsh measures would lead to the murder of one of the friars by a



Rascally Settlers at Branciforte, across the River from the Mission Santa Cruz — circa 1800

Illustration by R. W. Cooke III

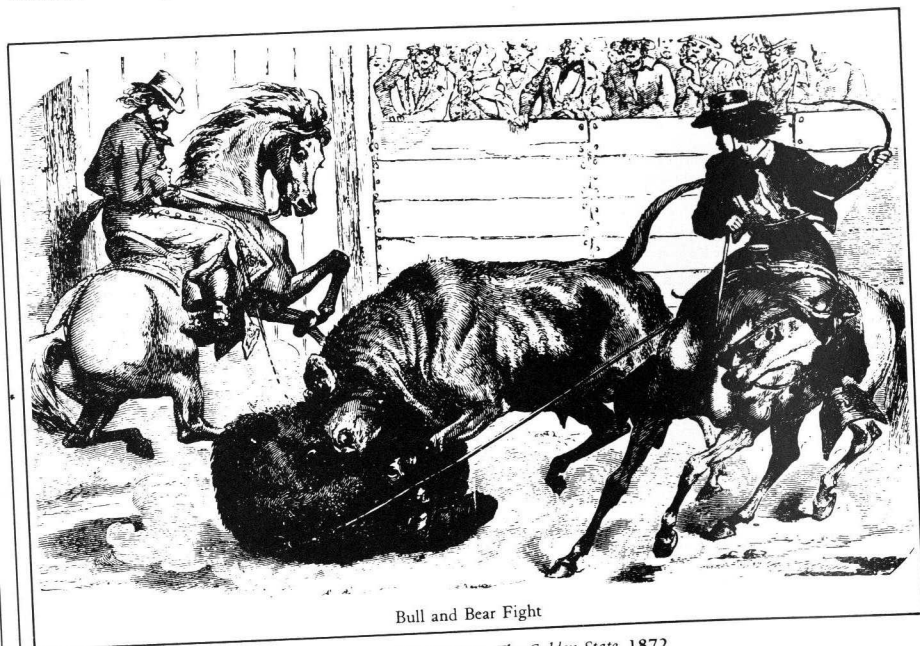
Before long (Branciforte) boasted a mile-long horse racetrack, as well as other popular amusements such as gambling, fandangoes, and bear and bull fights.

band of rebellious neophytes.

When six retired soldiers from the Monterey presidio joined the settlement in 1798, the padres hoped they would bring a semblance of respectability to the town. Among the new settlers was Jose Joaquin Castro, who as a 16-year-old boy had come to California with his parents in the de Anza cara-

tators sitting on high platforms, where they were believed to be safe even if an animal happened to escape. It was a barbarous sport, the bear's hind leg being fastened to the bull's foreleg by a long chain. If either beast showed a disinclination to combat, a horseman would throw his lasso over the bear and drag him toward the bull, repeating the performance until the contest was over.

These lively activities did not endear the townspeople to the padres. Moreover, the best pasture land was on the Branciforte bank of the river, where the mission herds had long been accustomed to feed. Now there were constant altercations caused by intermingling of the cattle and confusion about ownership of the stock. On the other hand, the mission had all the best arable land, and the settlers found it difficult to



Bull and Bear Fight

from R. G. McClellan, *The Golden State*, 1872

van. His father was now established on the Rancho Buena Vista, in the Salinas Valley, of which he was co-owner with Jose Maria Soberanes. The young Castro was delighted at the prospect of also having a piece of land he could call his own. At 28, he had spent 11 years in military service and had a wife and two small children. Granted both a house and a farm lot in the pueblo, and provided with a few cattle and horses from his father's rancho, he looked forward to a better way of living.

To a degree, he was not disappointed. Branciforte developed into quite an exciting place. Before long it boasted a mile-long horse racetrack, as well as other popular amusements such as gambling, fandangoes, and bear and bull fights. The latter were held inside wooden corrals with the spec-

harvest sufficient crops to sustain themselves.

By 1823, Jose Joaquin Castro's family had increased to 11 children, and he wanted to provide them with a more secure future than the uncertain existence Branciforte could afford. Accordingly he petitioned the governor for a land grant and was given the 13,000-acre Rancho San Andres, stretching from the coast into the mountains. On the property he erected a house, not far from the beach, and for a time alternated residence there with his home in the pueblo. His rancho was the first of four given to members of the Castro family, their land eventually totaling over 50,000 acres. Castro's daughter, Martina, had the lion's share.

The handsome young woman, a feminist ahead of her times, was fiercely independent and determined to be in charge of her

destiny. In 1833, she requested a land grant from Governor Figueroa and received the 1,668-acre Rancho Soquel. Still not satisfied, she petitioned for additional acreage adjacent to her original grant, and in 1844, she was given the 32,702-acre Rancho Soquel Augmentacion. Her land comprised vast forests of redwood and live oak, extending to the mountaintops at the boundary of present-day Santa Cruz County. For years she managed her own properties, even though she was married three times and gave birth to eight children. But her love life was not as successful as her business enterprises. She was widowed soon after her first marriage. Her second husband, an Irish sailor named Michael Lodge, was murdered on his way home from the goldfields. And the Frenchman Louis Depeaux, her third matrimonial partner, disappeared on a trip to the South Seas.

Meanwhile, Martina's father, the widowed Jose Joaquin, had remarried at the age of 63, choosing as his bride a girl of 17. For the lovely Rosaria, he built an imposing

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adobe house on the Rancho San Andres, overlooking the great sweep of the Pajaro Valley. The second story was graced by a 30- by 50-foot ballroom, where the couple entertained their friends at many a gay fandango. The house still stands, beautifully restored as a private residence.

Other major land grants in the Santa Cruz country, besides San Andres and Soquel, are brought to mind by place names such as Aptos, Zayante, Corralitos, and Salipuedes. But for the old town of Branciforte, probably the best memorial is the avenue which bears its name. Its route follows the course of the mile-long racetrack laid out by the Spaniards in 1798. Of the mission complex nothing remains except an ancient adobe on School Street. Believed to have been a portion of the soldiers' barracks, it was purchased by the state of California, in 1957, and is now a State Historical Landmark. The mission itself is commemorated by a small replica of the church built on the site of the original compound.