

Town of Branciforte worried padres

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Santa Cruz honors its mission heritage, but completely ignores its historic Spanish village of Branciforte. It was the third and last Spanish town established in California, and the only soldiers' retirement community.

Branciforte was the birthplace of democracy in Spanish California, the birthplace of the independence movement and the first place to welcome non-Spanish settlers.

The village was named for the viceroy of New Spain. With war looming in Europe, the viceroy feared an invasion by Russia, England or France. The California missions were largely defenseless, depending on only four presidio forts for protection.

Only two pueblos (secular towns) were established in Cali-



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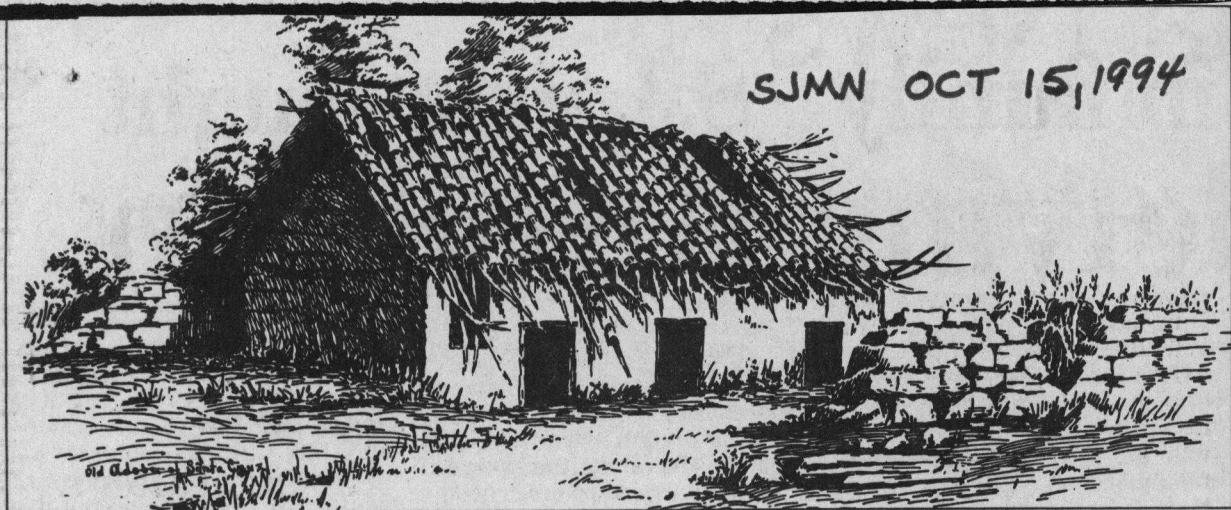
fornia for Spanish emigrants — San Jose and Los Angeles — and those had been disasters. One of the Santa Cruz mission's founders, Father Salazar, complained to the viceroy in 1796 that the settlers at the other two towns were undisciplined, did not submit to authority, and were a menace to the Indians, whom they treated as slaves. He feared for

his mission should a settlement be located near Santa Cruz.

To remedy this, the third secular town would be different. It would be established as a *villa invalidos*, or "veterans' retirement community." It would be populated by retired soldiers, who already understood discipline and order. They would be armed so they could serve as an unpaid militia, able to be called back into service at a moment's notice to defend California.

In 1796, Chief Engineer Alberto de Cordoba came to Santa Cruz with the governor of California, Diego de Borica, and six men to investigate the site's viability. Though the local padres advised them to try Pescadero instead, the wealth of natural resources around Santa Cruz convinced

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ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION

Only one of the original adobes remains on Branciforte Avenue; this one, sketched in 1907, is gone.

Secular town of Branciforte was a birthplace of democracy

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them to establish the village there.

It was anticipated that Branciforte would become a shining memorial to the viceroy's name. Instead, it was the least successful pueblo. First, the settlers broke Spanish law mandating that each mission be left with a three-mile buffer on each side. Branciforte was only a half-mile from the mission. In turn, the Santa Cruz padres differed over the size of Branciforte's grant, over the years changing the acknowledged west boundary from Valencia Creek (south of Aptos), to Soquel, to Arana Gulch, and finally to Seabright Avenue.

At first, no retired soldiers saw Branciforte as anything but exile from Mexico. The first settlers ended up being the families of eight convicts, attracted by the promise of an adobe house, land and livestock, weapons, and a five-year pension. The Santa Cruz padres must have been horrified to learn their new neighbors were to be gun-toting convicts.

But the Utopia the settlers expected was not waiting when they arrived. No buildings, no supplies, and no tools with which to build anything. They suffered the first winter in grass huts, feasting on the begrudged charity of the mission. The mission guards finally built the villagers a



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few adobe dwellings for their comfort. Retired soldiers finally came to settle, but this improved nothing. The year Branciforte was established, the mission saw the largest defection of Indians; 138 escaped, leaving only about 30 to do all the mission labors.

Relations between the mission and the pueblo never were good. Far from feeling comforted by a village to defend the coast, the mission considered Branciforte to be the invaders. Under threat of punishment by law, the Brancifortians were compelled to attend services at the mission chapel. The padres considered the Spanish settlers as much savages as the mission's Indian charges, and wished to civilize the Brancifortians as well.

One couldn't find a more disaffected group of people. The town's residents felt betrayed and abandoned by the government of New Spain, which had kept none of its promises.

Branciforte became the birthplace of democracy in Spanish California, when it held the first elections in the province in 1803. But far from defending New Spain, Branciforte was the first voice to call for California's independence and the closing of the mission system in 1805. The padres did not let up on their desire to see Branciforte closed down, either.

While Branciforte was not closed, in 1822 it lost its township status when New Spain declared its population of 120 was too small for an autonomous entity. So Branciforte was put under the jurisdiction of first San Jose, and later Monterey. The first non-Spanish settler in California was Jose Bolcoff, who jumped ship from a Russian trading vessel in 1815 and settled in Branciforte. Of the first five Anglos to settle in Branciforte, three were pirates.

When Mexico won its independence from Spain, it closed the missions in 1834 and distributed the lands to the Indians and Spanish settlers. All 21 county land grants went to Branciforte residents, with half of them going to the Castro/Rodriguez clan. The mission lands were given to the villa at the outskirts of Branciforte Township. One mission building became the prison to isolate the criminal element away from Branciforte Plaza. But it was never used.