

Pioneer Spirit: A History of the Winterhalder Family in Santa Cruz County

By Geoffrey Dunn

Well into his ninth decade, George Lyle Winterhalder still has a sparkle in his eyes and a bit of the devil in his smile. His gait is steady, his handshake firm. The lines that frame his ruggedly handsome visage trace back to turn-of-the century Santa Cruz, and the blood that runs through his veins reaches back even further—to the late 1700s and the founding of the City of the Holy Cross. In many respects, the history of European settlement in Santa Cruz County and the history of George Winterhalder and his forebears are one and the same.

Born in the winter of 1904, Winterhalder was a child of Santa Cruz County's rugged and wild North Coast. Throughout his youth, the Winterhalders lived in the long-forgotten farm communities of Laguna Creek, Yellow Bank, Scotts Creek and, later, Bonny Doon. His was a childhood of hard work and endless farm chores, but as he notes with his characteristic grin, "We also had a lot of fun."

There were endless hay rides and milk runs with his father and older brothers. By the time he was only six-years-old, young George would climb up a gate to mount a horse, and then ride two miles along the coastal trails to retrieve the family mail. Later on, when the family had moved to Scotts Creek, he would bicycle along the Coast Highway up to Swanton, where he visited friends and socialized. "I went through a lot of cranks on that bike," he grins.

George and his brothers also spent a good deal of time hunting and fishing. They collected abalone, then abundant, and mussels along the coast, gaffed salmon at night with flashlights in San Vicente Creek, and hunted rabbits at Yellow Bank. "In a half-hour or so you could get more than a dozen rabbits," he recalls. "You could get as many as you wanted to carry back."

By the time he reached his teens, George was regularly milking 22 cows, twice a day. "I once milked 31 cows without stopping," he smiles. "Took almost four hours. My hands got pretty tired."

Afterwards, he would head into the then-bustling town of Davenport and, occasionally, into the big city of Santa Cruz, where he'd stop at the old Star Theatre and watch Tom Mix movies. Then it would be back to the family farm for more chores.

"There was never a day that we didn't have some work to do," he notes. "My mother, father, brothers and sister—there was always something for us to get done. That was farm life back then, I guess. We didn't know anything different. That's just the way it was."

That's the way it had been for George Winterhalder's ancestors for generations.

The Winterhalders' local lineage dates back to the earliest days of Santa Cruz County's recorded history. George's great-great-great grandfather was Joaquin Castro, who as a young boy traveled with the legendary expedition of Juan Bautista de Portola from Sonora, Mexico, to what is now San Francisco in 1774. He would later become one of the first European settlers in the region.

Most people living in Santa Cruz today live under the assumption that the city is essentially the same community in geographic terms founded by Franciscan priests in 1791. In fact, modern-day Santa Cruz represents the conjunction of two disparate communities—Mission Santa Cruz and the Villa de Branciforte.

Six years following the founding of the mission on the western banks of the San Lorenzo River (near the present site of Holy Cross Church), the Governor of New Spain, worried about Russian expansion, ordered the establishment of three secular pueblos in Alta California—Los Angeles, San Jose, and Branciforte, the latter located on the eastern banks of the San Lorenzo River (near what is now Branciforte Elementary School).

Santa Cruz and Branciforte were two entirely separate entities, with vastly different governing bodies, rules, regulations, economies—and ways of life. It wasn't until 1905 that Branciforte was incorporated by the City of Santa Cruz.

In 1798, six retired soldiers, or *invalidos*, who had served ten years in the army of New Spain, were granted pensions and small plots of land as inducements to settle in Branciforte. One of those six was Joaquin Castro.

The Castro family, according to the Spanish historian Julio de Atienza, is one of the one of the five families in Old Castile which descended from the country's first kings.

Joaquin's father, Joaquin Ysidro Castro, was an officer in the De Anza expedition of 1776, and had been sent to San Jose in the 1790s to help settle the incipient pueblo there. Joaquin's mother, Martinas Boutilliere de Castro, was reputed to have been born a countess in France and a cousin of Louis XIV. As a result of political turmoil, she and her family were exiled to Spain. One account has Martinas and Joaquin Ysidro marrying at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, while another has them marrying in Sinaola, Mexico in 1754.

While his parents resided across the Santa Cruz Mountains in San Jose, Joaquin Castro set down powerful roots in Branciforte. He married Maria Antonia Amador, the daughter of Sergeant Pedro Amador (Joaquin's commanding officer). Together they had 13 children, including the legendary Martina Castro (Lodge) and Maria de los Angeles Castro, who was later to marry Joseph Ladd Majors.

By the early part of the 19th Century, Joaquin Castro was one of the most prominent figures in the region. At various times he served as *juez de campo* (judge) and *alcalde* (mayor) of Branciforte. Following Mexico's independence from Spain, he and his children would eventually become the recipients of eight major land grants in Santa Cruz County, including ranchos Aptos, Soquel, San Andrés, Rodeo Gulch, and Refugio (the North Coast). They were indisputably the largest landholders in local history.

In 1827, Joaquin's wife, Maria Antonia, died at the age of 43. Although he was approaching his sixtieth birthday, an elderly age for that era, Joaquin married a 17-year-old bride, Rosalia Briones, with whom he had three more children. Soon thereafter he was granted Rancho San Andrés (now known as San Andreas) and built for his young bride a grand adobe home, which still stands on Old Adobe Road near Corralitos. He died in 1838.

Joaquin Castro's fourth daughter, Maria de los Angeles, would find happiness and stability in her marriage to Joseph Ladd Majors, an innovative and intrepid frontiersman from Tennessee. They had 22 children, 19 of whom lived into adulthood.

The life of Joseph Ladd Majors is one of the most fascinating in the annals of local history. According to family legend, Majors, born in 1806 in Bell Buckle, Bedford County, Tennessee, was a relative of Alexander Majors, the founder of the Pony Express. Although neither Alexander Majors' memoirs, *Seventy Years on the Frontier*, nor other historic accounts of

the Pony Express make direct mention of Joseph's name, it is possible that he was a distant relative of Alexander, who was born in Kentucky in 1814. Both had family links to North Carolina.

What is certain is that in 1834, Joseph Ladd Majors and a band of other Tennessee trappers, including Isaac Graham and Joseph Ware, journeyed along the Santa Fe Trail to California. After spending the winter of 1835 in Los Angeles, Majors made his way to Santa Cruz County. According to Bancroft's *History of California*, Majors purchased interests in a Zayante distillery in 1837 and was involved with Graham in a variety of political and entrepreneurial activities.

Santa Cruz County, of course, was still under the domain of Mexico during the time of Majors's arrival, and Mexican officials were growing weary of Yankee pioneers moving into the region. Mindful of that, Majors became baptized as a Catholic in 1838, became a naturalized Mexican citizen, married Maria de Los Angeles Castro in 1839, and, at least temporarily, changed his name to Juan Jose Crissótomo Mayor.

With a growing population of English-speaking frontiersmen, tensions between Californios and Yankee interlopers heightened. In 1840, a party of Mexican soldiers stormed into the region and arrested 46 *extranjeros*, or foreigners, including Graham and Majors, who were initially held in Monterey and charged with plotting the overthrow of the Mexican government. While Majors was released at the urgings of his Mexican wife, the rest were shipped off to San Blas, Mexico, where they were kept under horrifying conditions until their release months later.

Over the next decade, Majors (or Crisóstomo Mayor) would use his naturalized status to great benefit. He served as the middleman for a series of large land deals, as he allowed his Yankee colleagues to place land holdings in his name, and then lease or sell [leased or sold?] the land back to them.

It was in Rancho Zayante, which included most of modern-day Felton, that the first power sawmill in California was built. Originally granted to Joaquin Buelna, the rights passed on to Job Dye and Ambrose Tomlinson, before Majors acquired the property for his old friend Graham in 1841. Majors continued to expand his empire. In 1840, he built one of the first secular flour mills and tanneries in California at Rancho San Augustin, and, eventually, he and his wife controlled vast tracts of land granted by the Mexican government, including Rancho Refugio on the North Coast. They ran large numbers of cattle, and in the fall, Majors would drive his herd to the Feather River, near Sacramento, where he would sell his stock to Indians and '49ers who were prospecting for gold.

In 1843 Majors built a new grist mill, powered by a large undershot water wheel, along Laurel Creek (which was sometimes called Majors Creek) in Santa Cruz and built a large home above it on upper Walnut Street. The barren bluffs overlooking the city (now Westlake) were planted in grain.

The building of the Majors grist mill, which cost \$12,000 was apparently a raucous community affair, and its completion cause for celebration. An old document at the county Recorder's Office recalls in broken Spanish that a friend of Majors named William Barton became so drunk and clamorous ("ebrio and clamoroso") that he became embroiled in a fight with an English carpenter named Henry McVicker. Barton's friends later claimed that McVicker had attacked Barton with a knife because Barton was an enemy of Isaac Graham.

The mill quickly became a center of local commerce. In an oral history conducted by the University of California, Thomas Earl Majors noted: "People used to bring their wheat [to the mill] on burros over the Santa Cruz Mountains from the old town of Santa Clara...Over the hills, over the trails, to get their wheat ground. He would take part of the flour for his pay. Then they'd go back with their winter supply of flour."

Under the Bear Flag Republic, Majors became the first mayor (or *alcalde*) of Santa Cruz, served on the first city council in 1848 and, when California was admitted to the Union, was elected to represent the city at the state's first constitutional convention in Monterey, although he did not attend. He was also the first treasurer of Santa Cruz County. When the county's first tax funds were placed in his safekeeping, he had no place to put them; they eventually were placed under the bed of his friend Moses Meder—the "first county safe."

In 1848 Majors purchased the Eagle Hotel on School Street, near the present site of Holy Cross Elementary School. He used the building for his offices. Four years later, Majors sold his vast landholdings north of Santa Cruz to Hiram Scott, a young seaman from Maine who had come to California in pursuit of gold. The region soon became known as Scotts Valley.

Throughout the 1850s, Majors and his family prospered. One of his sons later recalled that his father butchered a steer every Saturday and distributed the meat to those in need.

In spite of such generosity, fate was not kind to Majors and his wife. The great drought of 1863-64 virtually bankrupted Majors, and he died almost penniless in 1868. In 1879, the family house burned down. His wife, Maria, lived for 35 more years in poverty. Slowly, but surely, a series of lawsuits stripped her of all her land.

Although she was nearly destitute, spoke little English and could neither read nor write, Maria was nevertheless widely respected in Santa Cruz for her skills as an herbalist. One of her patients was F.E. Morgan, who grew up to be a well-known physician in Santa Cruz. As a young boy, Morgan injured a leg that became infected to the point where amputation was called for. Maria stepped in, applied herb poultices to Morgan's wound, and amputation was avoided.

Near the end of her life, Maria gave a bitter interview to the Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, in which she declared:

"Years ago, thousands of acres of land were mine, and horses and cattle and sheep enough to keep sheep herders busy from rise to set of sun. Then I had fine houses and chests of money and silk dresses and laces and jewelry and friends, ah!, many friends...But the beautiful house on the hill was burned. My husband died, my boys drank the wine and played the cards, and the Americanos came like hungry wolves...

"Today I am old and poor. The young lawyers who were my friends and who made the papers for me are all very rich...They have hundreds of acres of land and much money, while I sit here like an old owl in a dark corner and tell those who ask me that these men have robbed me of all that was mine by their crooked talk and their crooked laws."

Although both the *Sentinel* and Margaret Koch's book *Parade of the Past* declared that Maria lived to be 90, she actually died in 1903 at the age of 85. At her death, the Santa Cruz *Surf* ran a front-page obituary that declared: "Mrs. Majors lived to see her vast possessions gradually slip away, and from being the heaviest tax payer in the county, she lived to receive assistance from the county."

Long before financial tragedy struck her parents, Daciana Majors, one of Joseph and Maria's oldest daughters, married Theodore Winterhalder in April of 1859. She was 16 years old.

Winterhalder, a native of Baden-Baden, Germany (near the French and Swiss borders), had immigrated with his older brothers, Joseph and Charles, to Santa Cruz by way of the large German settlement in Cincinnati, Ohio, soon after California was admitted to the Union.

The entrepreneurial Winterhalder brothers operated a bakery, butcher shop and jewelry store on Main Street (now Front Street) in the rapidly growing commercial district of downtown Santa Cruz. A front page advertisement from the June 18, 1859, *Pacific Sentinel* notes that:

Charles Winterhalder would respectfully announce to his friends and the public that he keeps continually on hand, and for sale, on the most liberal of terms, a general assortment of Watches, Clocks, Silver and Plated ware. Jewelry in Great Variety! Gold Pens!

Together with many other articles in his line, to which attention of those wishing to purchase is respectfully solicited...
At the Old Stand, Main St., Santa Cruz

Theodore and Daciana Winterhalder had four children—Albertina, Charles (nicknamed "Toady" because he was tow-haired), Joseph, and Leonard Theodore—before Theodore died young at the age of 34 in 1873.

Theodore's son Leonard, born in 1862, had little to do with his uncles' downtown businesses after his father died. According to George Winterhalder, his father Leonard was a teamster in his youth, driving a team of seven horse for Henry Cowell's vast lime operation, at what is now the University of California. Later, he got involved with cattle and dairy operations along the North Coast, gradually accumulating a few head of his own.

In 1897, Leonard married Elizabeth Etta Hart, the daughter of a Soquel farm family, and together they established the first of the family's dairy operations at Laguna Creek. Over the next 20 years, they would run dairies at Scotts Creek, Laguna and Yellow Bank (today known as Panther Beach).

They would also raise seven children—Leonard Jr. ("Dude"), Earl, George, Gerald, Lawrence, Joseph, and finally a girl, Glenette. An eighth child, Arthur, died before his first birthday.

The kids went to various elementary schools in Davenport, Davenport Landing, Laguna and Bald Mountain. "School was okay," George says with a grin. "But I can't say it was much fun."

Dairies were a family operation, and all of the Winterhalder children had special tasks to perform—and every one of them learned how to milk cows at an early age.

"We started out with a herd of about 20 cows," George recalls, "and then we went up to milking about 80 a day. We made cheese at first and brought it up to San Francisco, then later we brought it into town at the Sunshine Creamery on Walnut Avenue.

"My dad was in charge of the cheese making," George continues, "and my second brother, Earl, he used to help him a lot with that. At that time, he had a big vat that was about eight-feet long, and you rolled your sleeves up, and you had to keep it stirred all the time so it wouldn't blend together. Then we put in the press and pressed it together. That's where the holes come in.

"They don't do that today. They run it out on a big slab and then they grind it up. You notice you don't see holes in most cheeses anymore. Not like they used to. It's not as good as it used to be. They don't go through all the hard work anymore. They just throw it out on the big slabs."

The Winterhalders brought their cream either into Santa Cruz or to the Wilder Dairy just north of town. They sold milk for 22¢ a gallon and averaged 200 gallons per day. "[Deloss] Wilder used to come up and get it in an old Model T. He cut the back out of it and turned it into a flatbed truck."

If a cow gave birth to a female calf, it was kept in the herd and raised to be a milker. The bull calves were taken down to the butcher shop for fresh veal. It was a hard reality for the young children. "I guess that's why I never liked veal," George notes.

The Winterhalders' final dairy farm at Yellow Bank ran nearly 75 cows on more than 2,500 leased acres. When Leonard Winterhalder died at the age of 60 in 1922, it was left to his 18-year-old son, George, to run the family farm. His older brother Leonard had gone into the carpentry business (he later helped build the Civic Auditorium), while Earl had gone to work for the county (and later worked for Granite Construction.) George was pretty much left to care for his mother and four younger siblings by himself.

George ran the dairy for a few more years, then gave it up in 1924 on the eve of the Great Depression. "It just got to be too much," he says simply. "Times had changed. We just couldn't make a go of it any more."

With his dairy years now behind him, George followed his uncles Charlie and Joseph into the rapidly growing North Coast lumber industry.

In 1926, George met a pretty young Santa Cruzan named Dorothy Sinnott, who lived with her family on King Street. Dorothy's Irish immigrant father, Nicholas Sinnott, was a sawyer at the old San Vincente Lumber Mill up the coast. Her mother, Maude Thorpe Sinnott of San Jose, was one of 21 children.

Dorothy was working in a dentist's office at the time she met George. They were married the following year and set up their first home on Van Ness Avenue, where they raised their four children—Robert ("Bob"), Betty, William ("Bill") and Georgann.

During the 1930s, George was working for the Santa Cruz Lumber Company, when he and five of his fellow co-workers, including James M. Maddock and his two sons, Newt and Bob, formed San Lorenzo Lumber Co. The Maddocks, who were distant cousins of Dorothy, were also descendants of Santa Cruz County pioneers; Thomas Maddock, a Civil War veteran and native of Ireland, settled in what is now Big Basin State Park in the late 1860s. By the end of World War II, ownership in the lumber company, located at the triangular juncture of Water Street and Soquel Avenue on Santa Cruz's East Side, was limited to the two Maddocks brothers and George. An article in the August 1, 1946, Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, noted: "Possibly because they are all young men with many friends in the business and community, there is a more friendly informal atmosphere at 474 Soquel Avenue than is to be found in many places of business."

There was also a delightful reference to Charlie ("Toady") Winterhalder, the elder brother of George's father:

No article about the lumber industry in Santa Cruz would be complete without a mention of Charlie Winterhalder, uncle of George. Charlie is a "spry young fellow of 80," today functioning as efficiently as ever as call order man in the yard. He has been in the lumber business so long there is nobody about who knows just when he did start.

George and the Maddocks held on to their ownership of San Lorenzo Lumber until the mid-1950s. At that point, George went to work driving a truck and selling lumber for the McCrary family at Big Creek Lumber near Swanton. In many respects, he was returning to the haunts of his youth.

In 1975, George was forced to retire because Big Creek's insurance company wouldn't insure a 71-year-old driver, regardless of his abilities. George reluctantly hung up his driving gloves. At his retirement dinner, he was presented with the steering wheel from the truck he had driven for nearly twenty years. "It went through three engines by the time I retired," George smiles. "With a full load on it, I'd get about four miles to a gallon of gas. When it was empty, I'd get about ten."

With their folks busy working, the Winterhalder children grew up in Santa Cruz during its freewheeling heydays, when the community was still small and close-knit. In the 1990s, all four of them still lived in Santa Cruz County.

Robert, married to Carol Pether-Grunert, is yard manager at San Lorenzo Lumber, where he worked in his youth as a driver. He was involved with copper mining in Nevada and worked for Big Creek Lumber until the early 1980s. From his former marriage to Dorothy Darrah, he has three children—Barbette, Gretchen and Lyle.

Betty married Mark Elward and raised three children: twins Mark and Mike, and Michelle (Shelly). Betty rose in the ranks of County Bank to serve as a vice-president and branch manager, and has been active in a variety of civic organizations, including the Miss California Pageant, the United Way, the Boy's Club and the Dominican Foundation.

Bill worked his way up to Senior Vice-President of County Bank, married his wife Patricia Vierra, and raised two sons, Jeffery and Brian. He eventually purchased and now operates the Ford-Lincoln-Mercury auto dealership in Santa Cruz.

Georgann, the youngest, also worked at County Bank and later at Big Creek Lumber in the credit department. After marrying Don Caponigro, she stopped working outside the home in order to raise her family. They have two sons, Ron and Ryan.

Bill Winterhalder recalls his youth in Santa Cruz and the lessons he learned from his parents. "My folks always made us work for a living. I was working in a candy warehouse when I was five years old. I helped out at the lumber yard. I started selling newspapers before I was ten for about \$15.40 a month.

"About the time I turned 26, I set goals for myself. It was those goals that kept us together as a family and gave us something to shoot for"—much like Joseph and Maria Majors had had something to shoot for a century earlier. In many ways, his ambition was fueled by the same pioneer spirit that drove so many of his forebears in the early days of Santa Cruz history.

It is a golden, autumn morning in the foothills overlooking Santa Cruz, and George Winterhalder and I have decided to take a ride in my truck through the far reaches of the North Coast. Dorothy, his beloved wife of 67 years recently passed away, and he agreed it might be good to get out for a while and revisit some of his old haunts.

To ride through the Santa Cruz Mountains and coastal valleys with George Winterhalder is to ride back into the pages of local history. Along Graham Hill Road—named for the man who crossed the Santa Fe Trail with his great grandfather—he reminds me that this was an "once an old wagon road. We used to ride on this with our horses."

As we pass through downtown Felton, he points up the San Lorenzo Valley and smiles, "Used to be a lot of stills up in those woods. Just about everybody had one during Prohibition...Some of it was pretty good."

On a steep pull up Felton-Empire, he informs that he had first graded this stretch of road with a tractor nearly 70 years ago. On Smith Grade he points out the site of the county's first petroleum mine, from which bitumen was garnered to pave roads throughout Northern California.

A mile or so further, he points to a small hollow in the redwoods and tells me matter-of-factly, "You want to know something? That's where I was born."

I pull my truck to the side of the road and we survey the site. George's eyes are staring back nearly a century. "It was in a small cabin, up near those trees," he says. "Not there anymore."

When we reach Bonny Doon Road, he shows me rolling hills that had been planted as vineyards near the turn of the century. "Used to be a lot of old Italian women carrying baskets of grapes on their heads up here. Lots of Italians growing grapes and fruit back then."

Slowly, we weave our way down to the Pacific. When we reach the Coast Highway, George tells me, "I wish I had a dollar for every time I've driven along this stretch of road."

On the bluffs above Waddell Creek, George looks out at the ocean. It's a spectacular vista, the water blue and silky. "See that ocean out there," he tells me. "It's different every time you look at it. It's never the same."

At the northern intersection of Swanton Road, George urges me to turn off. We pass the Big Creek Lumber Company, where George worked for many years, and begin the long, steep climb up the mountain. "This was how the whole road up to San Francisco used to be," George says. "Used to take about six hours to get up there. You had to wind your way up just about every creek bed. There weren't any bridges back then."

On our way back to Santa Cruz, George recalls virtually every family that farmed or lived along the coast. At nearly every turn in the road there is a memory. He shows me where he and his siblings played at Scotts Creek when they were children, and where he milked cows as a young man at Yellow Bank.

Before we get back into Santa Cruz, we pull over one last time at Wilder Ranch. He takes in the wild stretch of terrain that disappears into the northern horizon, his eyes staring off into the distance. "Lot of big country up here," the great-great-great grandson of Joaquin Castro says proudly, grinning that pioneer smile of his. "I've seen plenty of it. I guess you could say I've seen it all."

Sources

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