

Living

Old Chepa

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Pacific Avenue regular developed her own system of welfare

By MARGARET KOCH
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LOOKING AT the picture of Chepa today, it's difficult to imagine her as a young and beautiful senorita, the toast of Monterey.

She died in May of 1890 in Santa Cruz and she is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery. She was said to be close to 100 years old when she died, and she had known Lt. John C. Fremont when he came through this area with his soldiers in 1846.

Chepa was a young, hearty woman when Fremont and his men camped on Thompson's Flat

A glance at history

(Graham Hill showgrounds today). She provided the soldiers with food and information.

Her baptism name was Josefa Perez, but in later years, everyone on Pacific Avenue knew her as Chepa.

Chepa was the belle of the ball when she visited her relatives in Monterey as a young girl. She was described as "La mas bonita de Santa Cruz" — the prettiest girl in Santa Cruz. It was rumored that the old romantic song, "The Maid of Monterey," was composed in her honor during one of her visits.

Chepa was born in Santa Cruz — date unknown — the oldest child of Jose Maria Perez and his wife, Margarita Rodriguez. The Perez and Rodriguez families were among the more prominent Spanish residents of this area.

Not all Californios welcomed the American "foreigners" to Santa Cruz, but Chepa was always friendly. She lived for some years in a comfortable home across the San Lorenzo River in Villa de Branciforte. In those days, it was a separate settlement, originally settled by Spanish Army officers and their families. For that reason it was referred to as "Spanish Town" by the Americans.

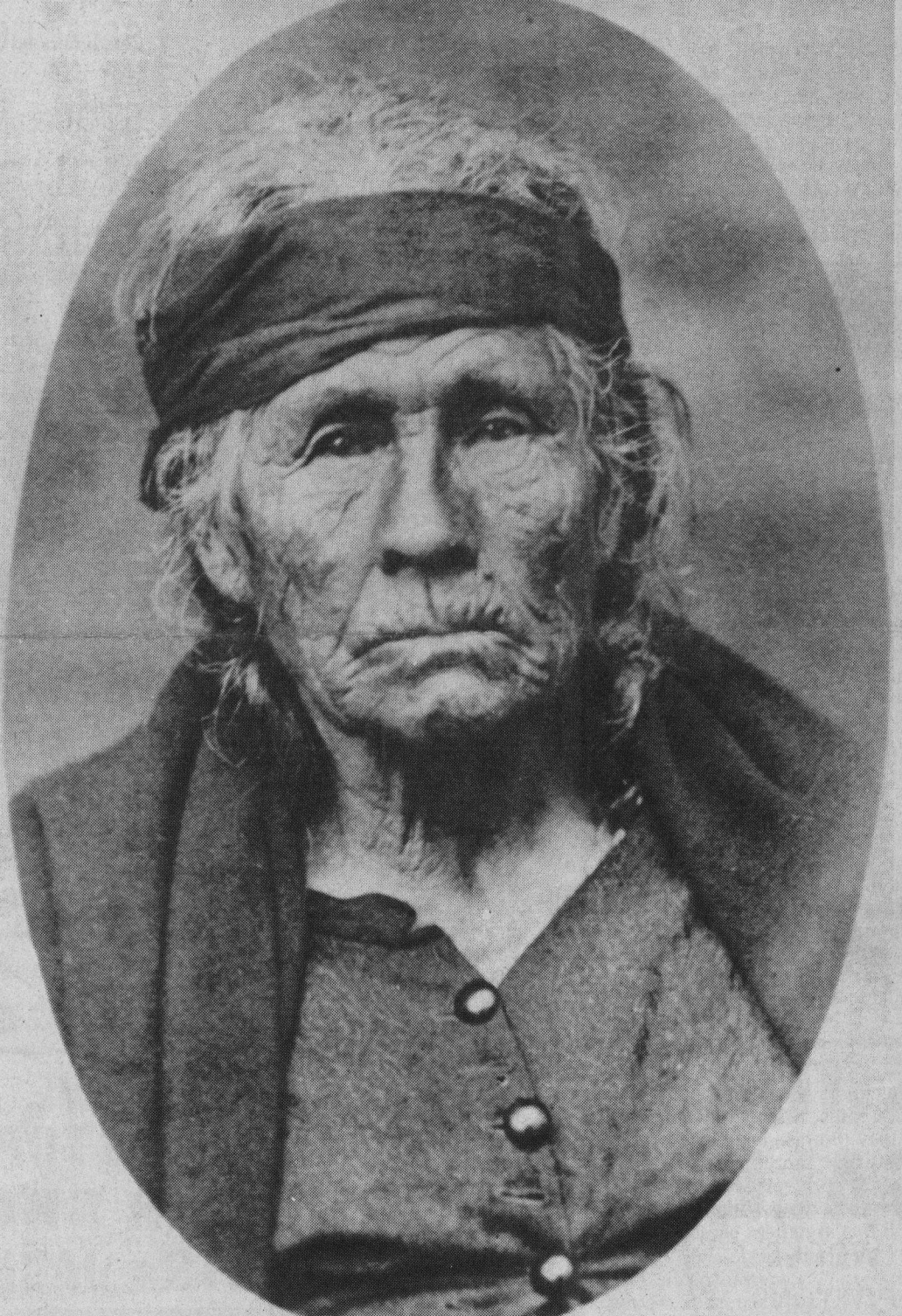
But Chepa fell on hard times in her old age. There were no social programs to help the elderly, no food stamps, no social security or welfare. Families were expected to care for their own, and usually did. Chepa's daughter did her best to help her aging mother, but Chepa also had her own ideas.

She lived in a cabin at the Water Street home of her daughter during the last years of her life, and she got her groceries — for free — from local merchants along Pacific Avenue. That was a day when most grocers displayed their produce in open bins at the fronts of their stores.

Chepa, old and bent, cane in hand, would make the rounds almost daily. She carried a sack and she greeted acquaintances (she probably knew everyone in town) with "Buenos dias." She also helped herself casually to any items in the bins that took her fancy. Up and down Pacific Avenue she hobbled, choosing an onion here, carrots there, perhaps an apple or two, potatoes from someone else's stall, dried beans and chilis — always beans and chilis. She would ask for a bit of meat for her stew and tobacco for her cigaritos.

No merchant refused her; they all chipped in gracefully; no one complained. They even gave her small amounts of money when she expressed a need for it.

When Chepa finished her "shopping," she



Margaret Koch archives

A Californio, Josefa Perez was known as 'Chepa' to Santa Cruzans in the mid-1880s.

would return to her cabin to cook her frijoles and chili con carne. Then, according to old accounts, she would spend the rest of the day "sitting on the sunny side of her cabin, smoking or dozing."

Her last year was spent partly in the County Hospital. No more forays down Pacific Avenue

for beans and potatoes. She died at her daughter's home and a funeral service was conducted at Holy Cross Church.

It has been said that the funeral was attended by a group of local merchants, paying their respects, all Protestants.