

# Figueroa city in Branciforte County was the way it began

By CAROLYN SWIFT

If prevailing local opinion had been a bit different 127 years ago, there may never have been either city or county to carry the name "Santa Cruz."

Residents here would live instead in the city of "Figueroa," or a county named "Branciforte."

These were the original but short-lived titles given during the era of mission secularization and the Californio-Yankee cultural transition. The title "Figueroa," died along with the governor who had bestowed his name upon local lands in 1834. When the county was formed in 1850, the first name was quickly altered to preserve the memory of "Mission La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz," a luckless establishment tied for most of its life in a no-win rivalry with the equally unfortunate Villa Branciforte. The change from Branciforte to Santa Cruz County was something of a final victory for the church.

There are very few places today that bear the name of the Spanish pueblo of Branciforte. There is an avenue, a school or two, and a library—but little else that serves as a reminder of Monterey Bay's first civilian town.

Branciforte Library was the site Saturday for a talk on development of that pueblo, its relationship to the mission and influence upon the town and county of Santa Cruz. The occasion was the library's tenth anniversary celebration, and speakers were Cabrillo College history instructor Sandy Lydon and Renie Leaman, director of HELP (Help Evergreen Live Permanently), who discussed some of the county's better-known pioneers buried at Evergreen Cemetery.

It was no real coincidence, Lydon said, that Branciforte and Mission San Juan Bautista were founded the same year, since both were created in 1797 as the result of a miscalculation in the Spanish mission system—a mistake made six years earlier with the establishment of Mission Santa Cruz.

Built in 1791, Mission Santa Cruz was set on scenic land somewhat remote from the path that led to other institutions in Alta California. Missions justified their existence by achieving high scores for Christianized neophytes (converted Indians), and within five years, Santa Cruz had already peaked with an unim-

pressive total of less than 525 registered souls.

Aware of impending failure at Santa Cruz, Franciscan padres established San Juan Bautista along the route of the El Camino Real. Ultimately this mission tapped the native population of the Pajaro Valley as well as several inland tribes to earn the best rating for captures and conversions.

But while the mission at San Juan solved a few problems for the Spanish Government—the villa at Branciforte was another headache.

Branciforte was authorized as a Spanish villa by Governor Diego de Borica, who was then concerned about potential foreign invasions and the questionable ability of four presidios to defend the coast of Upper California—itsself only a buffer for the long-established settlements in the south.

Governor Borica wanted a pueblo built somewhere between presidios at Monterey and San Francisco, at a site with good arable land, water and an accessible coastline. Santa Cruz was such a place. But to build a civilian settlement as a defense auxil-



An infantry unit on Soquel Avenue marches past Branciforte Avenue (left) in this undated photograph taken before the turn-of-the-century.

iary here, Borica had to break Spain's own rule that forbade the founding of a town within sight of a mission.

It was Borica's reasoning, Lydon said, that Mission Santa Cruz "was already on the skids," by 1797, and it wouldn't really matter whether or not a town developed across the San Lorenzo River.

But it did matter. The padres of Mission Santa Cruz overlooked no argument of resistance to the pueblo. They complained in writing that Branciforte was too close; that civilian influences threatened mission attempts to transform native Ohlones to loyal Spanish citizens, and that mission cows yearned for

pastures on the Branciforte side of the river. These grievances were countered by Borica, who noted the mission was already grazing and growing more that it could ever use. At one point, the governor threatened to close the mission down as a solution to quarrels between mission and villa.

Because of mission complaints, Villa Branciforte never became the industrious town Borica had envisioned. The villa was denied the tools and supplies it needed to complete the experiment.

Branciforte was third and last pueblo founded during the Spanish period in Upper California. It was to be a trial colony of honest farmers and skilled craftsmen to act as soldiers in case of invasion. But to the dismay of mission friars, the colonists arriving in the summer of 1797 were mostly "cholos," or "scoundrels."

By this time, Lydon said, Spain had some difficulty convincing settlers that opportunity awaited in far-away places. Branciforte was populated through a kind of "long distance work furlough program," he said, and many of those who came had been given a choice between jail and a regulated life on Monterey Bay.

Accusations and rivalry between mission and town continued until the fate of both had been linked together in a rather dismal path. Mission padres were particularly bitter in 1818, when Argentine patriot Hippolyte Bouchard sailed to Monterey and raided the town after unsuccessful attempt to rally the population to his revolutionary cause. Fearing similar treatment, Santa Cruz padres had fled to the hills, giving Branciforte civilians ample time to help themselves to mission valuables and supplies.

It was the plan of Governor Jose Figueroa to combine Branciforte with the mission property when Santa Cruz was secularized in 1834. If Figueroa had lived, Lydon said, there may never have been an issue over when the eastside would join the city of Santa Cruz.

The villa was granted authority over mission lands except for the property of the church. In 1835, Branciforte was the only administrative entity in the region from here to San Francisco.

During the 1830s and 1840s, the instructor added, Branciforte had the highest number of English-speaking residents of any Spanish town. A good number of these came to this area to carry on illegal enterprises while maintaining some closeness to the settlement at Monterey.

In 1850, the county was formed with the title of Branciforte, yet within six weeks the name was changed to Santa Cruz. Branciforte then became the Spanish-speaking town of north county during the years of transition from Californio to Yankee. The villa was home for both the remaining Indians and Californios, many of them direct descendants of the original settlers.

Branciforte residents were segregated from the town that grew around the mission church. It was odd, Lydon said, that a Catholic community lived on one side of the river while the Catholic church was in the center of a Protestant settlement across the San Lorenzo.

When city limits were first drawn for Santa Cruz, the line extended from Moore's Gulch, near Natural Bridges, to Arana Gulch. When Branciforte protested, the limit was withdrawn to Ocean Street. East Santa Cruz then had a 40-year wait before a successful election again

stretched the Santa Cruz line to Arana Gulch.

Branciforte was never excited about becoming a part of Santa Cruz. The election of 1905 was a hot campaign that centered on the issue of saloons and potential lower taxes for Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz favored the annexation, voting 594 to 44 in favor of the measure. In Branciforte, there were 186 in favor of annexation and 140 against it.

In her presentation, the director of HELP elaborated upon one of the Yankee pioneers who once frequented Villa Branciforte, a man later buried at Evergreen Cemetery.

This was Isaac Graham, who left a wife and four children in Hardin County, Kentucky, when he came to Santa Cruz in 1833. He was one of an undesirable type the Californios called "leather-jacket," and his first activity concerned the operation of a still at Natividad.

According to legend, Renie Leaman said, Graham may have been a cousin of Daniel Boone. He was seen as a rough sort of hero by Yankee pioneers, and along with his "Kentucky buddies," he had eventually engaged in working a sawmill, sheepraising and tanning.

It bothered Graham that he could own no property while the territory was under Mexican control. He joined with 40 "refleros," to assist Alvarado with the expulsion of Governor Nicolas Gutierrez in 1836, but was dissatisfied when the Californios failed to press for immediate independence.

Alvarado failed to pay Graham for his aid, and rightfully suspected the foreigner's loyalty to the cause of the Californio. Graham was seized along with other Yankees in the area and sent to prison in Mexico. With the

help of the British, Graham was released and was eventually paid a \$36,000 indemnity, although he claims to have lost half that amount to those who secured the payment for him.

Graham bought the interest of J.L. Majors in Rancho Zayante, began a sawmill and later joined in the Bear Flag Rebellion. By 1849, Graham was ready for another wife. He and Mary Bennett were wed without the benefit of a legal ceremony and had several children by the mid-1850s.

Problems for Graham arose when his son from Kentucky, Jessie Graham, arrived in Santa Cruz. Graham's wife fled with the children and all the family money. While tracking her down, Graham's son Jessie killed Mary Bennett's brother. Jessie escaped and was not brought for trial until 1888, when he was acquitted by a Santa Cruz jury.

Isaac Graham died 1863 and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery, the county's first non-Catholic burial site. Mrs. Leaman said the first burial was held there July 19, 1850, when a funeral was held for the 19-day old daughter of Julia Arcan, daughter of J.M. and A.H. Arcan—a family that crossed and named Death Valley on their trip to the west coast.

There is room for about 2,000 burials in Evergreen Cemetery, the director said, and it operates with a small endowment fund that provides enough for care of the property. Evergreen has also become a community project, with upkeep provided through CETA, veteran's organizations, a court referral programs and clubs. Mrs. Leaman gives historical tours of the cemetery, and knows the personal stories of some 250 Santa Cruz County pioneers.



This view was taken in the 1880s from the hills above Santa Cruz, looking south across the San Lorenzo River. The photo illustrates the

nearness of Branciforte to church property (center left).