

July 24, 1949

Santa Cruz Yesterdays



MAJORS MILL

(From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

On what is now Escalona drive, 150 feet south of Walnut ave., stood Majors mill, built by one of Santa Cruz earliest American settlers while California was still part of Mexico.

Joseph Ladd Majors, born May 26, 1804, on a farm near Nashville, Tenn., had come out over the Santa Fe trail, passed through Los Angeles late in 1834 and by the following spring was at Santa Cruz.

For the next ten years his name appeared frequently on the books of the store Thomas Larkin kept in Monterey. He was baptized a Catholic in the adobe chapel of Santa Cruz mission on April 16, 1838, and in 1839 was naturalized as a Mexican citizen.

Both moves were probably preliminary to his marriage in the

same adobe chapel on December 19, 1839, to Maria de los Angeles Castro, one of many daughters of Joaquin Castro.

Majors was 35 years old. Maria de los Angeles was 21. She and two sisters, Candida and Jacinta, were owners of Rancho Refugio, the rolling hills west of today's Santa Cruz city. Candida had 16 years earlier, at the age of 15, married Jose Bolcoff, the wandering Russian from Kamchatka who had settled here in 1817. Jacinta became a nun.

First American Alcalde

When American days came California towns were ordered to elect their own alcaldes to continue under Mexican law. On September 6, 1846, Majors wrote to Walter Colton at Monterey that Santa Cruzans had already held an election and that he had been elected.

Majors was then already a mill owner. Date of the erection of the simple wooden structure is fixed by one of the Branciforte documents preserved in the county recorder's office.

American-born and Mexican-born friends gathered on June 27, 1843,

to help raise the timbers of the establishment to which they could take their wheat for grinding. James Weeks, Albert Morris, Samuel Barton and Henry McVicker were all there.

The occasion got into the Branciforte official papers because of a complaint filed the next day by Weeks and Morris that McVicker had sadly beaten Barton in a celebration down at the mission after the timber raising at the mill. The document reveals that aguardiente had flowed freely.

Mill Stream Still Flows

Site for the mill was picked because of the little stream which still flows from the spring on the hill above. Its wheel was at the northeast end of the building, which in its perhaps 30 feet of length paralleled today's Escalona drive. The site today is a vacant lot owned by Wm. E. Pennell, adjoining that on which Fred McPherson Jr., last year erected a dwelling.

On the hill above, on the land which was his wife's share of the Refugio grant, Majors built a two-story wooden home with a porch on the front. Majors died May 25,

1868, and was buried in a little private cemetery near his home, where several of his children already rested. The home burned in the late nineties. The mill stood until it went down in a storm about 1910.

Mission Had Earlier Mill

Majors mill was not the first establishment for grinding wheat in Santa Cruz. The mission had had a small one erected in 1798 at the foot of the Laurel street hill with iron work given the Franciscan fathers by Vancouver, the explorer. Isaac Graham and his cronies may have ground grain at the sawmill at Zayante the year before Majors put up his plant.

Through the years, as the old building disintegrated, it was a picturesque subject for artists. Pupils of Anna Wells, early painter of this city; of Lillian Ward, the high school art teacher and many others, made it of their sketches.

After the big Majors house on the hill above burned, Majors' widow, the Maria de los Angeles Castro who had been born here in 1818, made her home in a little shack near the mill until her death in 1903.