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Landmark: What Now?

The Villa Was Lively

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There was a day when race horses thundered the dusty length of North Branciforte Avenue to the cheers and shouts of enthusiastic crowds...

In that day, before pavement, about 170 years ago, the street was a racetrack for Villa de Branciforte. Lining it on both sides were small adobe houses.

Spain controlled the Alta California coastal areas and Mission Santa Cruz had been established by the Franciscan Padres in 1793-94.

The Villa de Branciforte was one of three civil settlements in Alta California; the others were Los Angeles and San Jose. The Villa had been established by Spain to foil possible colonization attempts by Russia, England and France. Spain had no intention of losing her foothold in the "new world."

In 1796-97 Lt. Alberto de Cordova, a Spanish engineer, and Governor Diego de Borica, came to Mission Santa Cruz to confirm the site across the river for a villa. It was to be named for Viceroy Branciforte of Mexico.

In July of 1797 eight (or nine) settlers arrived from Guadalajara. Cordova's plan had called for the expenditure of more than 23,000 pesos which was not

done. Settlers also had been promised adobe homes which did not materialize and payments of 430 pesos over a period of five years.

One year after the first settlers arrived, who were by the way, refugees from Mexican law, told to "colonize or go to jail," young Spanish soldiers began arriving. They had completed 10-year tours of duty with the military and were encouraged to settle at the Villa de Branciforte.

Life at the Villa and life at Santa Cruz Mission were very different. The Mission padres taught the Indians to plant and sow crops, to weave, to work leather, to build adobes and do all sorts of useful things. They instructed them in religion and lengthy prayers were held several times daily. Work and church were the routine.

Across the San Lorenzo River at the Villa, life was exciting and colorful. There were fiestas and fandangos, aguardiente flowed like water, gambling was popular, bear and bull fights were wild and horse races went on even on Sundays — much to the shock and indignation of the padres. At the Villa, the motto was "Pleasure Before Business."

The pious padres disapproved almost everything the Villa residents did, and animosity grew by leaps and bounds between the Mission and the Villa.

These worldly pleasures must have been hard on the Indians because several of their traditional tribal games were based on a kind of gambling. When they left the Mission fields and orchards to join the noisy fun at the Villa, they were punished by the padres.

The padres protested to the Spanish authorities, then to the Mexican authorities, but in

vain. In 1816 a half-hearted attempt was made to tighten regulations at carefree Villa de Branciforte. From headquarters in Monterey came the following:

"All persons must attend Mass and respond in a loud voice, and if any persons should fail to do so, without good cause, they will be put in stocks for three hours.

"Living in adultery, gaming and drunkenness will not be allowed and he who commits such vices shall be punished..."

The Villa centered right where Branciforte Elementary School is located today, on North Branciforte Avenue at Water Street. The State Historical monument is at the corner there.

Villa boundaries reached to Seabright on the south, DeLaveaga Park on the north, Branciforte Creek to the west and Morrissey Boulevard in the east. By 1822 there was a population of 120 in the Villa according to Leon Rowland's Annals of Santa Cruz.

But Villa cattle and horses ranged far and wide, creating further problems and hard feelings with Mission Santa Cruz whose herds also ranged far and wide.

When Mission Santa Cruz was secularized in 1833-34, the Villa maintained its separate identity as a political entity until about 1850, and as a township for around 55 years. It was called "Spanish Town" by old-time Santa Cruzans. Then in later years, it was known as East Santa Cruz.

American squatters (a legal description) settled and held lands there, resulting in a snarl of legal disputes in the 1860s.

In 1905 the Villa was annexed to the City of Santa Cruz. The bronze plaque that marks one of Santa Cruz County's most interesting historical sites, was placed by the State of California in 1950.



The handsome plaque above was placed by the California Centennials Commission in cooperation with Santa Cruz Historical Society, in 1950. Below, a "long" view of North Branciforte Avenue, originally laid out for a horse race track for Villa de Branciforte. The Villa was one of three "pueblos" founded by Spain in Alta California.

