

The Early Years: Rio Del Mar and Aptos

By Allen Collins

"Rio Del Mar" (River to the Sea) was coined as a rhythmic, catchy place-name in the late 1920s to sell residential real estate. Historically as a name, it has no significance.

"Aptos", on the other hand, is blessed with important historical significance. In October, 1769, when the first land expedition rode through our area (the Portola party) there was a well established Indian village on the flat where today's Aptos and Valencia Creeks join, that flood-plain down behind today's Aptos Village. The Indians stated the name of the place, and it sounded like "Awotos" to the Spanish reporters—it was thought to mean "the meeting of the waters". Some 22 years later, when the Franciscan priests set out to establish Mission Santa Cruz, and started baptizing local Indians (the first in 1791), they recorded the names and addresses of their converts, in phonetic Spanish spelling. In the Mission records, "Awotos" came out variously as Aptos, Avtos, and Abtos. Interestingly, some 47 such local "addresses" were reported in the baptismal logs of Mission Santa Cruz, but only three have survived; Aptos, Soquel, and Zayante.

Despite the sea voyage of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo (a Portuguese in the service of Spain) along our coast in 1542, during which he reported upon a "Bay of Pines" at the latitude of today's Monterey Bay, and the sea-voyage of Sir Francis Drake (an Englishman) in 1578, during which he claimed "the land" (at Drakes Bay?) for Queen Elizabeth, Sebastian Viscaino (a Spaniard) is given credit for being the first to sail into (and name) Monterey Bay, in 1602. From his deck (or a beach), he raised his arms and ceremoniously claimed the "new land" for Spain. The Spanish era started with that proclamation, although the native Costanoan (coastal) Indians didn't know it! The Gaspar de Portola expeditions in 1769 and 1770 were the first Spaniards to pass through our area by land. The construction crew for temporary structures preceding Mission Santa Cruz included the first "permanent" Spanish residents in our area; they made camp by the San Lorenzo river in September, 1791.

The chapel of "Mission La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz" (the official name) was dedicated in May, 1794, but mission "services" (religious, educational, agricultural, commercial) got underway long before, and expanded rapidly. By about 1920, the mission organization was controlling the use of most coastal lands within today's Santa Cruz County on an absolute basis; it owned herds of 4,000-plus cattle, 8,000 sheep, 900 horses, vast grain/corn fields, orchards and vegetable farms, a grist mill, a leather tannery, etc. It was a big booming business, but as usual, even today, problems developed. Consider three of those problems:

1. The local Indian population did not take well to long hard days of regulated labor, abundant food and rich diet, new moral and educational standards and new diseases. In a matter of years, their population (and the size of the Mission's work force) declined dramatically.
2. Government officials in Madrid were anxious to speed-up Spanish colonization of our coast, to protect against invasions by the Russians already in Alaska with an established outpost at Fort Ross, by the English already in western Canada with ships off our coast, by the French with whalers and warships in the Pacific, or by the U.S.

pushing west overland. The mission system seemed too slow. Accordingly, a number of "pueblos" were authorized in 1797, to be independent of church and military rule. Branciforte, across the San Lorenzo River from Mission Santa Cruz, was one of those, and 8 convicts (4 with wives and families) from Guadalajara were moved-in to start the community, choosing the rigors of colonization instead of jail sentences. Thereafter, starting in 1797, Spanish soldiers completing 10-year mandatory enlistments in Alta California, were granted pensions and promised homes (which they never got!) if they would settle with their families in Branciforte, and remain on military call. The Jose Joaquin Castro family, later of local fame, was one of those. In time, Villa Branciforte grew bold and strong, while Mission Santa Cruz grew weaker, so the competition for control and use of natural resources and land shifted away from the church.

3. There were no enforceable governmental systems for recognizing ownership or protecting private property rights in frontier areas. Land "squatting" was prevalent in those years; it was the only way. So-called mission lands were simply taken over by families in need, and no penalties or property lines were involved. Understandably, there would be conflicts down the road.

Mexico became a free and independent nation in 1821, severing its 200-plus year relationship with Spain. The political turmoil that followed reflected itself significantly in our area. In 1834, for example, the Mexican government ordered the secularization of the whole mission system. Locally, all the management and administrative functions of Mission Santa Cruz were given over to the civil authorities of Villa Branciforte. The mission organization faded fast; the last Franciscan priest was withdrawn in 1849; earthquakes in 1845 and 1857 destroyed the mission structures.

From 1833 to 1844, to settle jurisdictional disputes and land-use problems along the Central Coast, and to reward the most prominent Branciforte settlers and their children, the new Mexican government granted vast tracts of land to individuals; a total of 22 grants involving 150,000-plus acres in our area. This was really the first time in local history that clear-cut land-ownership by individuals and property lines had been established authoritatively and recorded.

"Don" (gentleman) Rafael de Jesus Castro (b. 1803, d. 1878), third of 16 children of Jose Joaquin Castro, received 6,680 acres in 1833: Rancho Aptos, running from (today's) Cabrillo College to almost La Selva Beach, from the shoreline two to three miles inland, including all of today's Rio Del Mar. This man was a very enterprising and colorful character. He and his wife, Soledad Cota, made firm policy of granting large parcels of their Rancho land to each of their 12 children when they matured or married, whichever came first, and that kept the family close at hand, at least for a while. Together, this Castro clan made important history in the Aptos area; books have been written about their individual achievements and failures.

Rafael and Soledad, and a number of their heirs are buried in the Mt. Carmel Cemetery associated with the Resurrection Church across Soquel Drive from the Aptos Library. The Castro family plot is marked by a 12-ft. high monument, visible from the street; the related Arano and Melville family plots are adjacent.

Rafael Castro was a cattle-rancher, primarily, but was a shrewd business man in many other fields. His stock ran loose, and he didn't care, for his father (Joaquin) was granted Rancho San Andreas (13,000 acres immediately downcoast), and his sister (Martina) was granted Rancho Soquel (1,668 acres immediately upcoast) and Soquel Augmentation (32,702 acres immediately inland). Their branded herds intermingled to some extent, but stayed within the family.

Next, the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848, one result of which was that California became a U.S. Territory. Mexican rule had lasted only 27 years. And then, remember, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, near Sacramento, in February, 1848. The gold rush was on, and California was admitted to the Union as the 31st state in September, 1850. Important things were happening, and fast.

All of a sudden the famous Mexican land grants were in jeopardy; they had to be reviewed in infinite detail and certified ("patented") by the U.S. Government. Rafael Castro's Aptos Rancho was finally "patented" in 1860. If you want to see and feel some exciting local history, in beautiful long-hand penmanship, stop by at some convenient time at the

Recorder's Office on the second floor of our County Government Center in Santa Cruz: Diana Ray, who has run the place for years, will extend every courtesy in showing you Volume I of Patents, Page 27, Recorded April 23, 1860. Therein for the record is the whole detailed story of Rancho Aptos ... you will have had a rare educational experience, even if you don't read it all.

Rafael and Soledad Castro were having marital problems in the early 1870's, and two divorce actions were initiated by Soledad. The problems of dividing the vast and diverse assets of Rancho Aptos under California's Community Property Laws were overwhelming. About that time (1872), perhaps having heard of the family problems, along came Claus Spreckels, the fabulously wealthy "Sugar King" of San Francisco and the Sandwich Islands (today's Hawaii). He bargained to buy all but the Castro's 15-acre homesite and an 83-acre farm strip of Rancho Aptos for \$71,900 cash-in-hand; those 2,390 acres that had not been gift-deeded earlier to the Castro children or sold to others. That sale simplified and solved the Castros' problems, and the second divorce action was dismissed two days later.

Before the year was out, Spreckels had purchased an additional 450+ acres from two of the Castro children at \$30-\$40 per acre. With all of this, today's Rio del Mar became a small part of the new Aptos Ranch of Claus Spreckels.

The Spreckels arrival into the Aptos area in 1872 seemed to mark the end of the Indian-Spanish-Mexican dominance, and the beginning of "Americanization".

Sources

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