

SWIFTCURRENTS

Corruption in Fast Town of Corralitos by Carolyn Swift

Even though the town of Corralitos is only 6.5 miles from the nearest city, the territory definitely has always had a personality of its own, distinct from its neighbors in Aptos or the Pajaro Valley.

Corralitos is smaller but older than most others. It evolved from the Rancho los Corralitos, the ranch of the little corrals, granted to Jose Amesti beginning in 1823. The earliest references to a settlement here go back to the 1840s, long before Yankee homesteaders settled on the place to become Watsonville.

The closest relative to Corralitos is really Soquel.

John Hames of New York, the son of a millwright, arrived in Soquel about 1843 and, in the company of John Daubenbiss, built the first mills on Soquel Creek. He left for the mines up north during the Gold Rush, but decided to return here afterward, and became a founding pioneer of the town.

His brother, Benjamin Hames, joined him about 1854. He started a grist mill on Corralitos Creek and built a home nearby. Hames Road, leading from Freedom Boulevard to Corralitos, is named for Benjamin.

Ben served as Santa Cruz County Surveyor from 1855-1857 and from 1859-63. After

Ben died in 1866, John and his family moved south to a place that became known as Hames Valley

in Monterey County. Remarkably, the ranch near the town of Bradley was eventually purchased in the 1880s by a family prominent in Soquel, Corralitos and Watsonville. Cousins Ben and George Porter bought the ranch and Ben's brother, Ned — who built the first store in Soquel — died there after the turn-of-the-century.

In a collection of Porter family letters is one that tells, at times painfully, something about life in Corralitos in 1880, when the mills were in full swing and the town was robust and prospering.

This letter was actually written by distant relative of Bernice Huggins Porter, who obtained the letter from her great-grandmother, Lydia Pettitjohn Huggins. Newlywed Philander Pettitjohn from the Corralitos Flour Mills wrote to his cousin on January 7, 1880:

"I have not written to you since I was married and this evening being quite lonesome or a longing to hear from my old friends, I will pen you a few lines. I am quite well and hope the same for you all. The old mill is humming as I write to you and the office is full of men and

tobacco smoke.

Some of the men have remarked to me that I seem unusually quiet this evening. The fact is I am thinking of mothers and brothers, and sisters, thinking of everything that I do not wish to think about. I try to drive these thoughts out of my mind at times

but I cannot. Perhaps they do me good, but at times I think that I am happy. I should be, a kind wife, a nice little home and all that should make this life a happy one. I cannot say that I am. I should be, a kind wife, a nice little home and all that should make this life a happy one.

But after all there is something wanting. I cannot say, what it is. Perhaps it is gold but I think not and yet if I was rich I could make all my friends happy...

But I shall say no more of this now," he continued, "I never allow my wife to see me in one of (these) moods and she has just come into the office for me to come to supper..."

Pettitjohn was clearly alarmed at the changes he'd seen in only a few years, and the influences that were beginning to exercise power in his own life.

"I cannot say how long I shall remain at this place. I am in

hopes to leave here this next summer if I can find a place to go to. Corralitos is getting to be a hard town with the prosperity of business such as new saw mills, powder mills, a woolen factory run by Chinese and the flour mill. Saloons have sprung up like magic and the oil wells here in the mountains keep a large class of men employed that are anything but the best. What was a quiet little country village when I came here with good schools, church every Sunday and eastern people that wished to have things in the old Eastern style. We now have what is called in California a fast town, several saloons, bad men and bad women, no church on Sunday, only gambling, fighting and quarreling and whiskey by the wholesale and retail.

The population is now a mixture. Spaniards, Gruseros, Indians and Swedes and all kinds of mixtures. I try to keep out of their camp but a man in my position cannot always do so..."

Pettitjohn then confided to his cousin that he feared for his own weakening.

"All of the men that are under my employ and even the proprietors of the mill are in the habit of using a great deal of liquor. When I first came here I took

nothing but wine. To no other person would I tell it but you but now I am ashamed to say it but I often take something stronger. What can I do? What should I do? I must leave this place and go where surroundings are different. My wife knows nothing about this and I am afraid to tell her. Even now there is a keg of whiskey in this mill with a glass standing ready for all who wish to drink..."

The popular young man said he felt no temptation to join in card playing and gambling, but everyone sought him out for a drink. He could see, no doubt with some accuracy, that if he didn't stop soon he would be ruined.

"I have never taken too much but I know that it is growing on me steady but sure," he confided.

Pettitjohn's fate is unknown, although he apparently did leave Corralitos a short while later. His letter impressed the cousin enough to pass it along to his sister, who saved it, eventually providing Corralitos with a straightforward and extraordinary glimpse of life in 1880. Copies of the letter are now a part of the Porter family collection at the Santa Cruz County History Museum at the McPherson Center. □