

DeLaveaga Left His Fortune for Parks and for Charity

By Ross Eric Gibson

DeLaveaga Park could be called the Golden Gate Park of Santa Cruz. Sitting on a forested hill to the east, it has hosted several military outfits and a world-class golf course.

The park bears the name of its mysterious benefactor, a little-known wealthy naturalist, horseman and humanitarian whose generosity made him a Western Andrew Carnegie. Yet for many years, his instructions that 50 acres of the park serve the handicapped remained unfulfilled.

Jose Vicente deLaveaga, a native of Mexico, received business training in Germany before permanently settling with his parents in San Francisco in 1868. He was 24. He was a shrewd businessman, he spoke five languages and he acquired properties in San Francisco, Contra Costa, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties.

Santa Cruz was a favorite discovery, reminding him of his coastal hometown of Rosario, 40 miles south of Mazatlan. When he and his parents first visited Santa Cruz in the 1870s, they boarded at Andrew Trust's house on Lincoln Street, bringing their servants and doing their own cooking. They eventually made their local headquarters in the Joseph Pierrugues residence at Pacific and Maple streets.

DeLaveaga loved horseback riding and often was seen on county roads atop a silver-decorated saddle on his black pacer, Duke.

DeLaveaga had a quiet composure and distant air, in part the result of his near-total deafness, which isolated him in crowds and made it hard for the lifelong bachelor to make friends. Far from feeling superior and aloof, he developed a strong empathy for the helpless, the afflicted and animals.

His love of nature led him in 1887 to purchase a forested estate of hills and canyons, which had grown to 565 acres by 1892 and was valued at \$81,500. He laid out a network of bridle trails and planted trees, vineyards, citrus and nut groves and rare plantings from around the world. The estate was watered by five springs and 14 streams plus a flume along Branciforte Creek powering a waterwheel.

Local tailor Peter Anderson became his close friend and riding companion, and DeLaveaga's ties to the local deaf community eased his lonely existence.

He died in Santa Cruz at age 50. His will left \$775,000 of his \$900,000 estate to charity, with bequests to his servants, friends, Protestant and Jewish hospitals and orphanages, the needy of Spain, Mexico and Switzerland, local societies protecting animals and children, and Golden Gate Park.

His Santa Cruz estate, straddling the city line, was given to the city and county for a park. Fifty acres of the park were to be set aside for a large facility to serve the deaf, blind, lame, paralytic and aged of restricted means. Rentals of several San Francisco properties would pay for its operation.

But the illegitimate son of a deceased brother challenged the will, asking for a third of the estate. Litigation dragged on for years, and while the challenger lost, the will also was invalidated by section 1313 of the California Civil Code, which stated that only one-third of an estate could be given to charity. So Santa Cruz got its park but not its asylum. Yet, appropriately, the park became home to a zoo, animal shelter and riding academy.

In 1908, trolley service ran up Morrissey and Pacheco avenues to its original main entrance, with elegant rock gateposts adorned with six lanterns and flowering arbors. In 1912, the local women's club felt a fitting memorial to this naturalist was to build a rose pergola overlooking the main entrance, consisting of three rustic gazebos linked by arbors with a central Moorish dome over a fountain. This stood on Rosario Ridge, named for his birthplace, with a commemorative plaque on a stone monument. Today, the remains of his memorial lie in overgrown, vandalized ruins.

Over its lifetime, DeLaveaga has contained 14 park areas, including an 1894 covered bridge, three movie studios complete with false-front architecture, an amphitheater, rifle and archery ranges, and the "Flying Links" Frisbee golf course.

The military presence began in 1901. The armory took over the zoo site after 1933, blocking off the main entrance, and later the Naval Reserve blocked the Parkway entrance.

Then in 1974, a group of teachers recovering from strokes conceived of a center offering classes on how to get well or how to live with a disability. Cabrillo College became a sponsor, and the Cabrillo College Stroke Center was located in the park's abandoned naval building, thus fulfilling DeLaveaga's original dream for his park.

Sources

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