



Lafayette, California

July 2022

Vol. 49, No. 3

Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

THE RANCHO PERIOD IN CALIFORNIA

A colorful part of Lafayette history is known as the Rancho Period. Rancho was a Spanish word meaning “where people gather” but it soon came to mean “cattle ranch”.

The Spanish first came through this area in 1772 and missions were established – in San Francisco in 1776 and in San Jose (really Fremont) in 1797. All the surrounding land was considered mission land. Mission San Jose’s land extended from Fremont to the Carquinez Straits. All the natives in the area were potential converts (and slave labor) for the missions.



The Spanish government gave land to former soldiers beginning in 1769, but it was not owned by them. It was still Spanish Crown land. Many were thousands of acres, perfect for running cattle. Dried hides for leather, tallow for candles and soap, plus meat were the basis of the economy. The east coast Americans called cow hides “California Bank Notes” because so many were picked up on ships for America and Europe where there was a tremendous need for leather goods. During the Spanish period, (1769 – 1822) 30 land grants were made. By the end of the Mexican Period, (1822 – 1848) about 500 had been made.

After Mexico won its War of Independence against Spain, the missions were dissolved in 1833. The remaining natives were “set free” often without homes or, in some cases, tribes. They had been forbidden to speak their languages, practice their culture or return to their lands for several generations. They were thrown into communal life with natives of different heritages and had formed a kind of Spanish communication and lifestyle. The Mexican government was pressured to break up the Mission lands and give it to people who had been of service – mostly soldiers who fought the Spanish. This land was owned by the grantees.

The Rancho Period was known for its simple and hospitable life style. Walter Colton, the alcalde of Monterey from 1846 to 1849 wrote, “There are no people I have ever been among who enjoy life so thoroughly as the Californians. Their habits are simple; their wants are few; nature rolls almost everything spontaneously into their lap. Their hospitality knows no bounds...” It was common for a rancho to throw a *Fandango* for all the neighbors and workers in a large region. They would dance, sing, play cards and tell stories. Of course, food, especially beef was a big part, too. The party would last for days. When the Americans challenged their land ownership, the Californios were land rich but cash poor and not knowledgeable about things like mortgages or other debt. Many were easily bilked out of their land.



There are parts of 4 different Mexican land grants that make up present day Lafayette. Very few land grants in the state were given to women, and two of “ours” were!

1) Known to most is the Acalanes Grant that Elam Brown bought in 1847. Acalanes is the



smallest land grant in Contra Costa County. It had been granted to Candelario Valencia who was the son of a soldier on de Anza’s expedition and had been a soldier himself. He lived in “Happy Valley” for 5 years, but complained that he was harassed by natives. He left his land to live on other land he owned in San Francisco. He sold the Acalanes Rancho to William Leidesdorff, a San Francisco land speculator, who sold it to Elam Brown. Our downtown is on the east edge of the grant, and it extends west to the Orinda border.

2) La Boca de la Canada del Pinole contains the Springhill and Reliez area and Briones Park. Its name means “Mouth of the Pinole Valley”. Pinole is derived from a native word for flour often made of cattails, or other local plants. Maria Manuela Valencia de Briones (1796 – 1884), mother of 12, was granted the land in 1842.

3) The lower part of Reliez Creek formed a boundary between La Boca de la Canada del Pinole and another land grant: Canada del Hambre y las Bolsas. The east side of Pleasant Hill Road to Olympic Boulevard was in this land grant. The name means Valley of Hunger and Pockets of Land. This was granted to another woman, Teodora Soto in 1842. This grant was made of Sobrante – leftover land from the other land grants. These non-contiguous bits of land are the Bolsas (pockets). The rumor is that the soldiers of the early Spanish explorers nearly starved to death in this area until natives gave them Pinole. That is probably why Hambre is in the grant's name. Teodora Soto had to fight for her claim once it was included in the United States and was denied ownership until 1866. By then, she was so in debt from her legal woes that she sold the land.

4) Laguna de Los Palos Colorados is the land grant that Burton Valley is part of. All of Moraga and part of Orinda fall into this grant. Joaquin Moraga and his cousin, Juan Bernal, were granted this land in 1841. Palos Colorados are the redwood trees in Canyon which extended farther into Moraga and over the hill to Oakland. The Laguna was a lake that filled in to a field and is under Campolindo High School.

While the Rancho Period was short, lasting only from 1833 to 1848, it has had an impact on California culture. Those days were filled with hard work, but also fun and friends. Food enough was available through small farming and cattle, goats, pigs, and chickens. It was a stress-free life until Mexico lost the war with the United States.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2022

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Patricia Howard
Stuart Collett
Janet Thomas
Cooper Ogden

Wayne Lawson
Kim Bertolero
Brit & Mike Ascher
Janet & Rick Cronk

Patricia Stull
Blake Hedlund
Alice Lynn

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. If you have a **red dot** on your address label for this issue, your membership is up for renewal in the next month or two. If you have a **red L** on your address label you are a Life Member and do not pay dues so if you'd like to make a donation it would be appreciated. We have made a small increase in membership fees effective July 2021.

Student Membership is \$15

Individual Membership is \$30

Family Membership is \$60

**Additional Donations are always appreciate. Please send to LHS
PO Box 133, Lafayette CA 94549**

LUIS ORTEGA

Luis B. Ortega is known as the world's best and foremost rawhide braider. He was born in 1897 in a part of California settled by his Spanish ancestors. A fifth generation Californian, Ortega traced his ancestry to the state's first Spanish settler, Jose Francisco de Ortega who was credited with discovering San Francisco Bay by land in 1789. In 1905, at 10 years of age, he was introduced to the art of rawhide braiding by a 110-year old Tulare Indian while still a youth on the Bar S Ranch near Santa Barbara. His mentor had mastered the crafts under the tutelage of the Santa Ynez Mission Friars, continuing a tradition of instructions begun 200 years earlier. But Ortega moved well beyond the bounds of the California braiding tradition, advancing from the usual 6 and 8-strand to create 16 and 24 strand masterpieces unrivaled in their intricacy and beauty.



Ortega left home in 1911 at age 14, and worked as a cowboy in the region between Santa Maria and Salinas, California. During World War I, he went to Mexico, to the state of Chihuahua, to bring cattle to the United States by train and also served in the US Army. After the war, as a buckaroo on ranches from Arizona to Oregon, he began to braid leather again, making reatas, ropes, hackamores, and bridles essential to his trade. Ultimately, his talents were recognized by western-artist Edward Borein, who directed Ortega into the full-time production of hand-braided rawhide and leather items. He first set up a shop in Santa Barbara and later moved the shop to Walnut Creek and later to Cottonwood. There he started doing “fancy” work and invented the dyeing of rawhide, allowing him to introduce color to his braiding without using tanned leather. Ortega, who braided for many California ranchers, ultimately separated his work from others through his skill and aesthetic touch. But it was his wife, Rose, who was his greatest ally. She traveled the horse circuit with him, inspiring him to write his two books and acting as his charming “publicist.” The extraordinary precision and



delicacy of an Ortega piece makes it instantly recognizable and his work is displayed in museums across the West, including twenty-four pieces in the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. In his later years, Luis turned to writing as well as braiding, producing two books (*California Hackamore* (1949) and *California Stock Horse* (1949)), about his reminiscences of early ranch days, as well as numerous articles that appeared in various articles. But it is his braiding work that is his singular achievement for he has set the ultimate standards, made an art of an ancient craft, while remaining utterly faithful to the aesthetics of working tools. Every piece of his work is totally usable (though most seldom are), an achievement that every artist hopes for – beauty transcending utility. He died in 1995, with Rose following several years later. He holds the enviable distinction of being the only leather braider in the world to be designated a national treasure by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in Washington, DC (1986) and is represented in all major Western Museums in the United States.

~~High Noon: Western Americana

IN MEMORIAM: RUTH DYER



It is with great sadness that the Historical Society notes the death of Ruth Caroline Dyer, longtime Lafayette resident and volunteer at the age of 99. Ruth was born on July 13, 1922 in Oakland, California and grew up in Tulare County where her father grew oranges and olives. The youngest child and only daughter of Ephraim Dyer IV and Zoe Riley Dyer, she attended schools in Strathmore and Porterville before completing high school at the Sarah Dix Hamlin School in San Francisco.

She attended the University of California at Berkeley, which several generations of her family had attended and received her B.A. in 1944 and in 1945, and earned a Teaching Credential and M.A. in History. The first person in her immediate family to complete a graduate degree, she titled her thesis "The Indian Land Title in California: A Case in Federal Equity: 1851-1942.". She remained a loyal and generous CAL alumna her entire life.

Ruth began her career teaching high school history in Salinas and later taught in Antioch before embarking upon her thirty-year tenure at Lafayette's Acalanes High School.

She moved to Lafayette in 1951 where she became very involved in the community. Over the course of an exceptionally long and well spent life, she served on the Vestry of Saint Anselm's Episcopal Church. She was a founding member and later board member of the Lafayette Historical Society, and was active in the Contra Costa County Historical Society, including serving as president. She also served on the Lafayette Sign Commission, the Lafayette Design Project, and the Alamo-Lafayette Cemetery District. She remained active with these and other activities well into her retirement. Cheerful and uncomplaining, she maintained a lively interest in the world around her. She will be remembered and missed.

HISTORICAL DISPLAYS: EARLY LAFAYETTE FAMILIES & THE HORSE SHOWS



There are two historical displays depicting life in early Lafayette: the first is in the Library and tells about the Horse Shows of Lafayette in the 1940s. The second is in the Lafayette Plaza Shopping Center around the corner from Whole Foods (in one of the glass display cases) and introduces some of the early Lafayette families whose names may be still be familiar ones today. Thanks to Laura Torkelson and John Kennett for their time and talent in putting together these displays. Please check them out.





Lafayette Historical Society
PO Box 133, Lafayette Ca
94549

925-283-1848

www.lafayettehistory.org

LHS

**Board of Directors
2022**

Larry Blodgett
Andree Duggan Hurst
Nancy Flood
Sharon Jones Fraetis
Sande Hubbs
John Kennett
Mary McCosker
Janet Nadol
Laura Torkelson
George Wasson

Return service requested

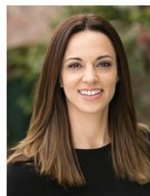
*Thank you to Lauren Deal for **again** sponsoring this issue!!*



I love Lafayette!

From Happy Days Preschool, Lafayette Elementary, Stanley Middle School and Acalanes High School, my roots are firmly planted in Lafayette.

I am fortunate to live and work in this amazing community and beyond proud to help new families find their place or sell a cherished family home in my beloved town.



LAUREN DEAL

REALTOR®

DRE 02060294

925.876.4671

Lauren@HurlbutTeam.com



PROUD MEMBER OF
DUDUM REAL ESTATE GROUP

