

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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¡BORONDA! (Part IV)

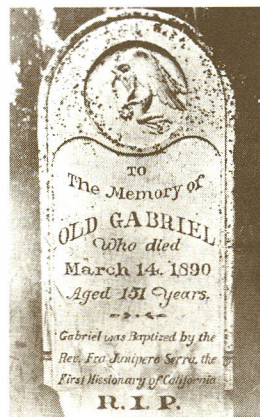
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José Sylvano Ambrocio Boronda (1857-1940)

Sylvano was born December 7, 1857 in his parents' second adobe, the building near Salinas which has been given recognition as a State Historical Landmark. Little is known of his life, other than that he lived and worked on the cattle ranch with his father, Eusebio. One can be sure that Sylvano's childhood and youth must have been filled with adventure and excitement due to Father "Chevo's" profession of capturing grizzly bears. At the age of twenty-eight Sylvano married Maria Ray Harris; her mother was a Graves, another pioneer family of the Salinas Valley. Close association of the Boronda and Graves families is historical. Their vast holdings adjoined, roughly along a division line marked today by the Salinas-Castroville road, Highway 183. Each family gave its name permanently to the land as "The Graves District" and "The Boronda District."

Almost a symbol of these early settlers, and indeed the resting place for many of them, is the Roman Catholic Calvary Cemetery which lies about a quarter mile south of the Boronda Adobe, at the bleak and windswept intersection of Boronda Road and the railroad tracks. Names of many fascinating people have been associated with this cemetery. The original owner of the land was Maria's grandfather, George Graves, who settled on the Salinas plains in 1853. As early as 1873 there was a burial ceremony at this particular spot; it was conducted by Father Hugh Curran of Castroville, spiritual administrator to the whole Salinas Valley Catholic Church at that time. Father Curran recorded the area as "Cemetery of St. Paul's" (the name was later changed to Calvary Cemetery). Here Father Curran proceeded to bury another fifteen bodies before April, 1877. That year a most interesting priest, the Reverend Cajetan Sorrentini (1815-1893), was transferred to Salinas City, becoming first pastor of the town's Sacred Heart Parish.¹ On this occasion George Graves presented the church with the plot of cemetery land as a gift, and on October 11th Father Sorrentini held a "Blessing Ceremony of St. Paul's."²

An important burial was held at "St. Paul's" on March 16, 1890 — that of "Old Gabriel" (Vittoria), a Tulare Indian who had died that day in Monterey County Hospital in Salinas after living many decades with the W.S. Johnson family at Natividad. Pallbearers included most of the town's prominent



(Anne B. Fisher Collection,
Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library)

citizens such as the Mayor, W.J. Hill; Hon. Jesse D. Carr; W.S. Johnson, now cashier of the Salinas City Bank; Benito Soberanes; and Maria's uncle, Captain J.E. Graves, who had been one of the County's earliest sheriffs.

Father Sorrentini had first known "Old Gabriel" when he came to Monterey in 1855 to assume pastorship of the parish there.³ Even that long ago the priest had been impressed by the historical drama of the man's long life, and he gathered together affidavits of four reputable elderly people (including Señoras Hartnell, Munras and Castro) who declared they had known "Old Gabriel" when they were little children; that he had been baptized by Father Serra and, as a boy, been taught the art of stonecutting by the great Franciscan himself; that "Old Gabriel" had been employed as a workman on the Carmel, San Antonio de Padua and Soledad Missions. In 1887 the Monterey County Controller's office received a claim of \$545 "for the aid of the indigent Gabriel, whose age is 132 years. He was born in the year 1755."⁴ Reminded of (and again marveling at) this unparalleled age, Father Sorrentini in 1889 sent the affidavits to the Pope, together with a recent photograph of the Indian taken by J. Ed. Bacon of Salinas. The picture was hung on a wall of the Vatican, labeled "The Oldest Man in the World."

Now father Sorrentini read "Old Gabriel's" burial service at his Sacred Heart Church, again affirming that he did indeed believe the many oldtimers who thought the Indian had been at least 151 years old at the time of his death. The local chapter of Native Sons of the Golden West provided a memorial stone for the grave at "St. Paul's," beautiful, albeit being two days off on the death date (see cut; it was photographed by Carmel photographer Lewis Slevin).⁵

When Mayo Hayes O'Donnell visited the cemetery in 1954 she found the marble fallen flat on the ground in a weed jungle. Finally, in 1963, Harry Downie, Carmel Mission's curator famous for restoration of that building, decided "Old Gabriel" should be resting with the other thousands of Indians christened at his mission. At the time he stated that, from his research, he believed the man's age had been more like 140 years.⁶ With approval and assistance from the Salinas church, Mr. Downie had the body exhumed, placed in a "more suitable terracata [sic] casket" and moved into a new grave adjoining Carmel Mission, its marker proudly replaced at the head. However, the following year Mr. Downie's studies disclosed that there had been seven "Gabriel Vittorias" among the many generations of "Old Gabriel's" family listed in the mission records: he now believed the old *Tulareño* to have been much younger.⁷ The Monterey *Viejo* Chapter of *E. Clampus Vitus* promptly had a new marker made of bronze; it was placed at the foot of "Old Gabriel's" grave: "Mission Records show Old Gabriel b. 1771-d. 1890, Age 119 years." Whichever date is believed by today's daily tourist throngs, they are amazed at the longevity of one of the State's "First Americans."

Patriarch of the Graves family was George N. Graves (1813-1889), a wealthy Kentuckian who on August 15, 1846 married a widow with four children, Nancy Walker (1825-1889), daughter of one Ignatius Walker, also of Kentucky. The name of Nancy's first husband is not known. George Graves adopted all four of these youngsters, one of whom was Lovina (1833-1886), and reared them together with four others whom he and Nancy parented. The family came to California in 1850 and settled in the Salinas Valley in 1853.

Lovina Graves had a daughter in 1856, Maria (born July 26, died in 1945), by a man named Ray (whose first name has become lost in the dust of time); Maria would one day become mother of Lester Boronda. Lovina married again in 1860, Ebenezer F. Harris (1833-1893) who had come with his parents from North Carolina in the 1850 gold rush. Ebenezer had taken up farming near Salinas in 1856. The couple had four sons in addition to Maria, whom Ebenezer officially adopted.

José Sylvano Ambrocio Boronda and Maria Ray Harris were married on October 22, 1885. The following year they went to Reno, probably to investigate the possibilities of grazing some cattle in the beautiful Truckee meadows between slopes of the Sierras.⁸ Here, on July 24, 1886 Lester David Boronda was born. It is ironic that he should have arrived in the state of Nevada, thus breaking the direct line of succession for so many native Californian Borondas!

Sylvano and Maria continued to live with old Eusebio in the adobe and remained after his death. In April of 1889 a second son was born to the couple. They named him "Ray" for Maria's father. One day, while yet a toddler, the little boy wandered into a pasture where he was kicked by a cow; he died on July 20, 1891. Maria had no more children. It is said that she maintained a kind of melancholy the rest of her life.

At about the time Lester moved permanently to New York City, 1913, his parents left the old adobe and moved into a bungalow on Winham Street, the center of Salinas. The ranch house gradually disintegrated into picturesque ruins; in fact, one summer when Lester was visiting his parents he painted a picture of what was left.⁹ The canvas long hung over the fireplace of the Boronda Salinas home, but today its location is unknown.

Sylvano passed away on August 11, 1940; Maria, not until April 27, 1945. Their simple gravemarkers are together in Calvary Cemetery, adjoining those of "Little Ray" (as the back of his tombstone is incised) and Lester's bachelor uncle, Esiquio M. Boronda.



"Willow, weep for me!" — Boronda Adobe, 1930s
(Monterey County Historical Society, History Center)

Lester David Boronda (1886-1940)

Being born in the state of Nevada was not the only Boronda-Higuera tradition Lester would break, for his ancestors had been either scholarly schoolteachers or daredevil horsemen: such taproots little augured the flowering of an artist on the family tree. It is said, in fact, that his parents did strongly oppose Lester's ambition to attend art school.

Lester's childhood was normal. He attended the Graves Grammar School (located on property which had belonged to his mother's family), then in 1903 graduated from Salinas High School. Once questioned about having been a football star in those years, Lester answered that, "The team was so small, *everyone* was a star!" Certainly he did not look like an athlete, being slight of stature, but Lester was wiry and physically active all his life. Apparently, for him, sailboats were what horses had been for his male ancestors. Like them he was dark-complexioned, patrician of features, and known to be courtly in manners with a rather peppery disposition.

One wonders who or what convinced the young boy that he could become a painter. The Monterey Peninsula was beginning to buzz with artists shortly after the turn-of-the-century, and Lester must have met many of them while visiting his numerous relatives. However, it is not known whether he took lessons from any of them.

Pacific Grove had several men who might have influenced Lester. William Adam, a gruff Englishman who had studied in Scotland, was a well-known painter, lecturer and teacher. Another Englishman, Professor John Joseph Ivey, moved to "the Grove" before 1902 after having established the Art Department at the University of Southern California. Famous as a watercolorist, Professor Ivey was in great demand as a speaker, and his second studio in the village was built on the very grounds of the Chautauqua building where he was a frequent lecturer. During Lester's childhood Chautauqua was one of the favorite family entertainments, so probably the Boronda family sometimes traveled from Salinas to attend. Another academician in Pacific Grove was Munich-trained Joseph Kurtz Oliver who had moved there in 1893 to teach art at a small college. He soon opened a store of curios and antiques, later adding artists' materials; it became a favorite gathering place for painters during the next half century. Mr. Oliver's shop was a great attraction to children because of its collection of shells and Indian baskets, as well as for a garden with exotic desert cacti (at that time a novelty in northern California) and a small zoo. As a youngster Lester must have known Mr. Oliver. Years later the Olivers' son, Myron, would become a pupil of Lester Boronda.

During his highschool days Lester also might have met summer visitors in Pacific Grove, such as: C. Chapel Judson (who had taught at the Mark Hopkins and later would help found the Art Department at Berkeley); Theodore J. Richardson ("The Alaskan Painter" who often lectured about his sojourns in the north); Joseph Greenbaum (known as a portraitist, but who spent much time sketching in the little Chinese camp at Macabee Beach. At this time there were many other summer painters at nearby Monterey, such notables as William Keith, Theodore Wores, Evelyn McCormick, Francis McComas.

Charles Rollo Peters had built a princely estate in 1900. A regiment of creative people revolved around his hospitable studio, many from San Francisco's Bohemian Club. When Lester was seventeen, in 1903, he may have visited that club to see the spectacular "Blue and Gold" painting exhibit, a joint show by Peters (the blue ones) and Charles Dickman (the gold). Dickman was living in Monterey at the time. Both he and Peters had attended the Mark Hopkins School of Design and then studied abroad; they may have offered Lester advice about his education. Harry Stuart Fonda and his artist wife lived in Monterey then. On at least one occasion Fonda and Peters visited a rodeo to sketch the fast-moving action; it is not impossible that sometimes they allowed the young Boronda boy to accompany them on such jaunts.

However, the most probable influence in Lester Boronda's art life was Gottardo Piazzoni who had graduated from the Mark Hopkins and then studied in Paris. On his return in 1898 he held an exhibit of his work in Salinas.¹⁰ Lester was twelve, an impressionable age, and undoubtedly saw the exhibit. Furthermore, he had every opportunity to meet the artist because in those days Gottardo and his father made weekly trips to Salinas, crossing the tortuous Los Laureles grade to deliver butter from their dairy near Mount Toro. The kind little Swiss-Italian artist was the type of person who would have taken an interest in another farm boy with dreams about painting.

Whatever the reason, Lester Boronda was determined to obtain an art education. Despite his parents' objections, in 1904 he enrolled at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art, the school of the San Francisco Art Institute which was affiliated with the University of California, although located in the old Hopkins mansion atop Nob Hill. Its director was Arthur Mathews, originator of what has become known as "The California Decorative Style," and he had a powerful impact on most of his students. Mathews taught the principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Lyricism and the Art Nouveau sinuous line were stressed in painting. Decorative murals, "over mantles" and screens were very important. The beauty of materials for themselves was basic: wood polished to satin sheen; the burnish of hammered metals; glazes of such pottery as Fulper; Tiffany glass blazing in voluptuous colors; Japanese grass cloth impregnated with lacy leaves; books of oatmeal-like paper encrusted with rubrics. Above all, things must be lovingly hand-created. Which implied knowing how to *do it*! Lester Boronda enthusiastically enrolled in the diversified curriculum, taking everything from drawing (plaster casts, sterile cadavers or live models); to metal shop; to carpenter shop; to modeling (sculpture being taught in what had been the stable, defunct horsetroughs making excellent containers for the clay). Although Lester was at "The Hopkins" for only two years, its training proved to be the orientation for his professional career in New York the greater part of his life. Also he made many friends at the school, some of whom would be important to him the years ahead: Ruby Drew, E. Charlton Fortune, Gertrude Gorter, Armin Hansen, Maurice Del Mué, Maynard Dixon, Thomas A. McGlynn, Albert de Rome, Perham Nahl, Ruben Lucius Goldberg (one day to be known by everyone in the country for his cartoon strip with "wild contraptions." A "Rube Goldberg" has become an American vernacular).¹¹

The April, 1906 earthquake and fires in San Francisco destroyed much of the art school, as well as many plans of the budding artists. Possibly Lester Boronda was in a state of shock afterward: at any rate, one oldtimer remembers that the young man walked all the way home to Salinas, following the displaced railroad tracks like a wraith of some bindle stiff.

Nevertheless, Lester's education did not suffer for long. At the Mark Hopkins the students had had opportunities to meet and talk with other graduates returning from study abroad. Glowing tales of Paris were brought back by Jules Pages, Ernest Peixotto and Xavier Timoteo Martinez y Orozco (more often known just as "Marty Martinez"). Lester must have persuaded his parents to help him financially, for in the fall of 1906 he left for Paris and a year's study with the great Jean Paul Laurens at *l'Académie Julian* followed by two years of travel and study on his own in Germany and Italy.

Returning to California late in 1909, Lester Boronda headed straight for Sacramento to claim the hand of a belle who had been a classmate at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art, Ruby Drew. Her mother (*nee* Elizabeth Dunne) was from a family of Irish immigrants who had agricultural interests in the Sacramento Valley. Elizabeth had married Warren Proctor Drew, "a very proper Maine gentleman who was a nephew of the actor-producer John Drew (of the famous theatrical Barrymore family)." ¹² Lester took Ruby to Pacific Grove for a honeymoon which extended into a three-year residency.

To be continued.

Notes

- ¹ Originally dedicated to "The Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary," as of 1953 the name never had been changed officially, according to Rev. Earley.
- ² Father Sorrentini was born at Rome on August 7, 1815 and spent three years of his early ministry in the Holy Land. After coming to America he made several trans-Atlantic trips to his native Italy. An intellectual type, the father spoke several languages fluently and enjoyed scholarly pursuits in diverse fields. One was politics: historian Rev. Weber calls him one of Bishop Amat's "close advisors" who was sent at least once on a diplomatic mission to the Pope. Another was music, and Father Sorrentini was a personal friend of the composer Verdi. Yet another interest was history: not long after arriving in Monterey in 1855 Father Sorrentini became the first priest to investigate Father Serra's exact burial site in the deserted ruins of Carmel Mission. With one of his parishioners (whom Dr. Albert Shumate identifies as Francisco Pacheco), during March of 1856 the father directed an excavation in the stone floor of the church. Several skeletons garbed in mundane clothing were found before, on March eleventh, the diggers uncovered a well-sealed vault containing the coffin of a body "... so luxuriously vested ... with a stole that had epaulettes of fine gold ... something that none of the others had ... (it) makes me believe that it is the one we are looking for," Father Sorrentini wrote his Bishop the following day (as quoted by Mrs. Smith in her study of the Carmel Mission). The priest and Señor Pacheco were frightened away by ruffian squatters, and the search was not resumed until 1882 by Father Casanova in his well-publicized exhumation. It is said that he recognized Father Serra's grave by the crozier within the coffin: almost child-size, it was scaled to the diminutive Franciscan.

- ³ Rev. Earley gives the date as November of 1854; Rev. Weber, November of 1855.
- ⁴ *Sacramento Bee*, December 1, 1887.
- ⁵ *Salinas Californian*, January 7, 1950.
- ⁶ *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, November 2, 1963.
- ⁷ Conversation of April 19, 1984 with Richard Menn, Curator of Carmel Mission.
- ⁸ Conversations of June and July, 1983 with the artist's daughter, Beonne Boronda.
- ⁹ There have been many occupants of the Boronda property since Eusebio deeded it to his two younger children, Sylvano and Agnes (Ynez) Boronda Anderson "for love and affection" in 1880. An out-building was added which was once renovated to become a separate living apartment. Sylvano sold his half-interest to his sister on October 12, 1891, but it seems that either Borondas or Andersons lived in the house until they sold it to Charles S. Brooks on June 3, 1929 (the History Center says that at one time it was even rented to a son of Francisco, Ygnacio Luis Boronda and his wife Rosa A. Wantenfel). It is interesting that Mr. Brooks rented the little house in back "to a Carmel artist;" sadly, we don't know his/or her name! It was the time of the Great Depression and Mr. Brooks went bankrupt before his death in 1939. Two years later his widow sold the property to a German couple who had rented the back rooms, Peter M. and Jean H. Dohn. After Peter's death in 1963, the Dohn widow in turn sold to Peter Michael Dolan. The Art Muse was still hovering about the property, for Mr. Dolan and a Mr. Jacobs conducted a ceramic studio in the adobe kitchen before selling out to a Mr. and Mrs. Wilson in October of 1965. In December, 1972 the Monterey County Historical Society, Inc., acquired the adobe and 5.5 acres of land through private donations plus the generosity of Mrs. Marguerite Wilson who still lives in the adjoining property. The Society's headquarters and History Center are located in the back building.
- ¹⁰ Seavey says the exhibit was held "in the newly-opened McDougal Building at Main and Gavilan Streets in Salinas."
- ¹¹ McGlynn catalog.
- ¹² Beonne Boronda, *loc. cit.*

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