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*Survey Party, c. 1885, Santa Rita
Courtesy of Steinbeck Library*

Inside: Lost Towns of Monterey County

LOST TOWNS OF MONTEREY COUNTY

By Meg Welden, Monterey County Parks Department

"...every ten miles along the traveled routes a general store and a blacksmith shop happened, and these became the nuclei of little towns..."

East of Eden, John Steinbeck

INTRODUCTION

Why do some settlements develop into thriving cities while others wither and die? Why do people settle in one area and bypass another?

Monterey County attracted settlers for many different reasons. Gold in the Santa Lucias, the Salinas Valley's rich black soil, nearby ports, a stage stop, a railroad depot or simply a store and blacksmith were all inducements to build a home in a certain spot.

There were other reasons as well. Some came attracted by visionaries who dreamed of that perfect community where the poor could get a foothold in life. Others came from Europe, ready to make a new start in a new land. Many were attracted by promoters and subdividers who kept one step ahead of the railroad, hoping their tract would become an important trade center.

The deathblow that struck these settlements came in many guises. The gold gave out, the water dried up, the land was no good. Railroad depots never were built, roads were abandoned or floods carried everything away. Sometimes it was simply a twist of fate.

The remains of many of these towns can still be seen at lonely crossroads, their bleached skeletons silent reminders of once bustling communities. Others can only be remembered through photographs and memoirs.

Following is the story of eleven such towns. Although boom turned to bust, these forgotten hamlets reflect the dauntless spirit of Monterey County's pioneers.

SANTA RITA

"About three miles northward from Salinas City, in this county, ensconced in the bosom of a little hollow of undulating prairie or plain of unsurpassed fertility and natural beauty, lies the hamlet of Santa Rita. It is a villa of some two hundred or so inhabitants, mostly of Spanish descent... It is a platted town and was laid out and dedicated to public use by Don J. M. Soto, the owner of the grand Rancho Santa Rita, in the year 1867."

So does Elliott and Moore's 1881 History of Monterey County describe Santa Rita, the third oldest town in the County. Also known as New Republic, the town boasted a store, Catholic Church and newspaper. However, it was most famed for Dr. S. M. Archer's County Hospital.

Elliott & Moore go on to say that "originally, it (Santa Rita) was intended to be the chief town of the Salinas Valley - lovely in location, and healthful in its atmosphere and surroundings. But the stupidity of man, the avarice of capital, and the consequent march of events - particularly of railroad extension of the line of the Southern Pacific - decreed that Salinas City should be the town of the Valley."

Southern Pacific engineers preferred a route through Soto's high table land, but his price was high. Meanwhile, Eugene Sherwood offered to give land for a depot and right-of-way. This was enough of an inducement that the line was built through Salinas, the first train arriving in September, 1872. Promising Santa Rita declined as Salinas grew to become the "Queen City of Monterey County."

JAMESBURG

Jamesburg took its name from the James family who settled in the Cachagua area, formerly the Los Tularcitos Rancho. John James homesteaded along the Cachagua Creek on land adjacent to the present Hastings Reservation. Fair sized cattle ranches were acquired by early settlers by filing on three kinds of claims by several family members. These included homestead, preemption and timber, all at 160 acres each. To prove each claim was settled, cabins were built on sled runners, and moved from claim to claim.

In 1886, John James established a Post Office, and his wife served as Postmistress. A flood during the winter of 1889 carried away the James' barn, dairy building and new orchard. They moved inland. Undaunted, they reestablished the Post Office as well as a Stage Stop for the Tassajara Health Spa, then at the height of its popularity. Later, a branch of the county library was added to the Post Office.

With the advent of the automobile, a stage stop was no longer necessary and Jamesburg's clientele dropped off.

ST. JOSEPH'S COLONY

When Claus Spreckels opened the doors of his great sugar factory in 1887, the face of Salinas Valley agriculture was permanently transformed. Thousands of acres once dedicated to grains were planted to sugar beets. This change rocketed the Salinas Valley out of a depression which held most of the county in its grips during the late 19th century. Spreckels needed workers and he urged families to come to Monterey County. Recognizing an opportunity, entrepreneurs and visionaries alike undertook the establishment of agricultural colonies. With promises of religious or cultural freedom, relief from poverty or simply a chance to become landowners, prospective settlers were lured with impassioned rhetoric and slick brochures. Basking in the glow of new-found prosperity, the Salinas Valley drew colony-makers and colonists like a magnet. One of these settlements, St. Joseph's Colony, was founded in 1897 and was a direct by-product of the sugar beet industry. Eleven thousand acres were purchased by the German Colonization Association in the Gabilan Range, about 15 miles north-east of Salinas. The Association hoped to bring 150 German Catholic families to the area to buy lots and farm sugar beets. They even printed stationery with a banner wrapped around sugar

beets proclaiming "Sugar Beet Land". Tracts of 5 to 10 acres were offered to the colonists for \$200 per acre. Each acre was advertised to yield of 12 to 15 tons of sugar beets.

German Catholics, predominately from the midwest, began to arrive in the Fall of 1897. By 1900 about 90 people lived at the colony, which was spread over a 250 acre area. A post office, store and group of homes were located at the east end of the property. A church, which doubled as a school, and more homes were at the west end. Many of the homes were built in 3 sections, with the animals and farmer's family separated by a central bay storage area.

Although the German Colonization Association may have had the best intentions, St. Joseph's Colony disintegrated into a sham real estate scheme. Misleading information and photographs were sent to prospective buyers. One story goes that a photo of bare buckeye trees with only the buckeye balls left hanging from the branches was sent to a woman in the East. N.H. Lang, secretary of the Association, wrote her that the trees were part of a valuable pear orchard already established on the property. She purchased the tract but soon found it worthless.

Visions of Eden began to dim as the colonist's sugar beet crops failed as did other, subsequent crops. Poor soil and lack of water brought the colony to its knees. Some settlers held out until 1907, but they too finally sold out. Some of their property was bought back by the Association, but the majority was sold to Charles and Henry Bardin.

JOLON

Located 20 miles southwest of King City, Jolon enjoys a long and diverse history. Originally it was an aboriginal site of the Salinan Indians, call Holomna. Also spelled Jolon and Jalon, it is generally agreed that the name means "valley of dead trees."



Ganoung Hotel, Jolon

Courtesy of Monterey County Agricultural and Rural Life Museum

Jolon got its real beginning in 1848 when Antonio Ramirez built a home and then transformed it into an inn to serve gold miners en route to the Mother Lode via El Camino Real. Flint-Bixby stage lines built an adobe inn for travelers,

barn and granary. Jolon's development increased rapidly, when in 1875 gold was discovered in the Santa Lucias. Miners flocked to the town for supplies and entertainment.

In 1876, Captain Thomas Tidball and George Dutton bought the Ramirez Inn and added a second floor to the adobe. About 1878, Tidball and Dutton dissolved their partnership, and Tidball built a wooden hotel, store, restaurant and bar around one of the old Flint-Bixby adobes.

By 1900, Jolon consisted of a Chinese laundry (set up by many Chinese miners who flocked to the Santa Lucias), a school, jail, dance hall, post office, Episcopal Church, several blacksmiths, barns and homes, two saloons, two stores and two hotels.

Forewarning of Jolon's demise came early, however, when in 1886 the railroad pushed south to King City and the old El Camino Real fell into disuse. By the turn of the century the Los Burros Mining District weakened. Tidball sold out and other enterprises started disappearing.

During the 1920s and 1930s, William Randolph Hearst actively acquired land in the area, envisioning the region as his ranching headquarters. Many buildings were razed. Today only St. Luke's Church, the Tidball Store and the Dutton Hotel ruins remain. All three are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

MANCHESTER

Indian legends of "yellow pebbles" in the Santa Lucias excited Monterey County settlers as early as 1770. Botanist David Douglas discovered gold flakes in tree roots in 1833, fifteen years before James Marshall's famous discovery. Organized mining activity in the Santa Lucias was not recorded until the early 1850s. The Chinese, forced out of Sierra Nevada claims, were Monterey County's earliest prospectors, practicing both placer and hard rock mining.

By 1875 the word was out. The Santa Lucias were overrun with miners and a miners meeting was called. At this time the Los Burros mining district was formed and the little settlement of Manchester became a bustling community. Hotels, a post office, miner's cabins, a blacksmith shop, bunk houses, a school, mess halls, a cemetery, general stores, a dance hall and several saloons sprouted up overnight.

One sensational account relates how Manchester got its name. Evidently, a huge blacksmith called Manchester got into a fight with a Los Burros miner. During the fight, Manchester's thumb was "chewed clean off". Realizing his thumb was missing, Manchester got madder and with one mighty blow, "laid the miner out on the hard cold ground". Awed spectators changed the community's original name, Alder Creek, to Manchester on the spot.

Between the 1860s and the 1880s, the District contained 500 claims in an eight-square-mile area. Eventually, over 2,000 claims were listed. In 1887, the area's most profitable claim, the Last Chance Mine, was discovered by W.D. "Willie" Cruikshank. The shaft was ultimately flooded, but first it yielded over \$62,000. If computed with the price of gold today, the Last Chance's profits actually ran well into the millions.

At the turn-of-the-century the town burned to the ground, leaving the few reminders of its existence. The mysterious disappearances of two Cruikshank family members, sightings of ghosts and the discovery of Massacre Cave (containing remains of long-dead humans) have continued the area's colorful legacy.

CONFEDERATE CORNERS

Located at the intersection of what is now Highway 68 and Hitchcock Road, the small community of Confederate Corners was established about 1865. Two Confederate army captains settled in the area, giving the hamlet its name.

Also known as Springtown, the settlement was described in Paulsen's 1875 Directory as follows:

"A general store and saloon, and a large blacksmith & wagon-making establishment constitute the business element of the place....A considerable amount of fruit, of very superior excellence, is raised here. A hotel is talked of, and, no doubt, it would prove a judicious and remunerative investment. Much travel would visit this place, were it only provided a good hotel and stable. A post office is to be petitioned for during the coming summer."



*Fenton Store, c. 1895, Confederate Corners
Courtesy of Monterey County Historical Society*

One of the Confederate veterans, L.E. Fenton, operated the store and blacksmith shop. Other families in the area included the Hunters, the Hitchcocks, the Gardsides, the Dixons, the Bidaches, and the Davises.

Confederate Corner's post office never materialized. Today Hitchcock Road, Hunter Lane and Davis Road bear the names of early residents. A few wood frame buildings from Fenton's shop still stand as further reminders.

NATIVIDAD

Natividad, located six miles east of Salinas at the foot of the Gabilan Mountains, has been the site of various activities for over 150 years. In the 1830s, a distillation plant for "aquadiente", a fiery sugar-cane brandy, was located nearby. The beverage's popularity waned with the decline of the Mexican government.

Natividad was the site of the only important engagement which took place in the northern part of the state during the revolt of the Californians against American military occupation. The battle occurred on November 16, 1846, between a party of Americans en route to San Juan to join forces with Fremont and a group of native Californians, who, hearing of their intentions, attempted to halt them at Natividad. The casualties amounted to four Americans killed and a like number injured, with slightly higher losses for the Californians.

By the 1850s, Natividad was a flourishing station of the Coast Stage Lines. Described as a "handsome village", the town was also a favorite stop for cattle drives on their way to northern markets. In 1868, Natividad had a newspaper, Charley Hamel's stage station and store, Uriah Burn's hotel, a saloon and billiard hall run by Michael Alpita, the stables of the Coast Line Stage Company and the "neat white schoolhouse" of Miss Altha L. Armstrong.

One early stage passenger described his stop at Natividad:

"The traveler rests here before resuming his seat for the overland journey to Los Angeles. Lean faced women cook your eggs, drawling men dole out a few scraps of information, a pack of geese advance a claim to the center of the street..."

When the Coast Highway (U.S. 101) was re-routed between Salinas and Gilroy to avoid steep San Juan Grade, Natividad was bypassed and its fortunes declined.

HILLTOWN

Old Hilltown was located on the right bank of the Salinas River near the present Highway 68 bridge. The town got its start in 1852 when James Bryant Hill bought 6,700 acres of Rancho Nacional. Hill, originally from Massachusetts, had worked as manager of Brook Farm made famous by Louisa May Alcott and other New England literary lights.

Hill's land stretched from the Salinas River to the "big slough" on the north 7 and from a little east of the present Highway 68 to Davis Road on the west. He setup a large farming project at the river crossing, including a 40 foot well. Record barley, wheat and vegetable crops, all innovative to the area, were successfully grown.

A number of people began to settle in the community, appropriately known as "Hilltown". Small hotels and stores were built as well as Salinas' first Post Office. In 1854 James Hill became postmaster.

Hill's enterprise hit hard times in 1855. His mortgage was foreclosed and the property divided among his financial backers. Hilltown survived despite Hill's

misfortune. The Post Office continued to operate until 1864. In 1867 Messrs. Sweet & Keating secured a license to operate a ferry boat at the river crossing. Later, it was taken over by Hiram Corey who operated it until 1889 when a bridge was constructed. Today State Landmark 560 commemorates the ferry.

BLANCO

In 1844, Tom White deserted his ship at Monterey, married a local woman and received 400 acres of the El Tucho Rancho on the Salinas River. He became known to his Spanish neighbors as Tomas Blanco, and the ford northeast of his house became known as Blanco Crossing.

The Bardin family were some of the first Anglo settlers in the area. In 1855, James Bardin Senior came across the plains in an oxcart. He purchased several thousand acres from David Jacks at 75 cents per acre. He started the Blanco School in 1856. It was used for worship as well as a community center in the evening. Washed away by flood waters in 1862, it was brought back on skids the following spring. The school was used until 1892 and then moved to Salinas to start service as a blacksmith shop.

The Methodist Episcopal South Church got its start in Blanco. In 1861 camp meetings were held at the Salinas River and then continued in the schoolhouse until 1868, when the congregation moved to Salinas.



*Breschini's Emporium, c. 1895, Blanco
Courtesy of Monterey County History Society*

Most of Blanco business enterprises were located at the Blanco and Cooper Roads intersection. The last vestige of this small community, the Breschini Emporium, succumbed to the 1995 flood.

PLEYTO

Lake San Antonio's visitors today know Pleyto as a campground, picnic and marina area on the North Shore of the lake. But in 1964, when the San Antonio Dam was completed, the original Pleyto was buried under 100 feet of water.

As early as 1796, the area was known as Pleito, or El Pleito. Pleito, a Spanish legal term meaning "litigation" or "dispute", may have been applied because of a dispute between the San Miguel and San Antonio Missions over property rights. Another theory is that the Indian rancheria of Assil, located near the old Pleyto bridge, was a meeting place where Indian disagreements or lawsuits were settled.

In 1845, the land was granted to Jose Antonio Chavez but came under W. S. Johnson's ownership in 1857. In 1868, William Pinkerton, Sr. bought 13,100 acres of the Pleyto Ranch. He raised sheep, as he had done in Australia, but an abundance of foxtails plagued the herd, often causing deaths. As the sheep population dwindled, he replaced them with cattle.

Many acres were farmed on the Pleyto Ranch, with wheat and barley the largest crops. Vegetables and fruits grew without irrigation due to an artesian well on the property (the only such well in Southern Monterey County, it supplied water from a depth of 145 feet).

Meanwhile, a town known as Pleyto grew up in the area. A hotel, stage stop, blacksmith shop, dance hall, post office, and school were built. The school had about 30 pupils and taught lessons through the 9th grade level. Horses and buckboards got the children to school.

From 1884 through 1889, William Pinkerton served on the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, representing the fourth district as it then existed. He would go into Salinas, see that some friends or neighbors were delinquent in their taxes, and would pay the amount for them, telling them to repay him when they had the money. Pinkerton and a neighboring rancher, Henry Lynch, personally installed the first telephone line in the area as well.

What would a tale of the Old West be without a legend of buried treasure? Pleyto has one! It is told that two men robbed the original owners (either Chavez or Johnson) during shearing time, when a great deal of money was around. One of the robbers was shot on the spot but the other, though wounded, did reach Salinas. Before he died, he told where he buried the gold - near a bank of the river under a tree on the Pleyto. Stage robberies abounded as well and Monterey's Robin Hood Bandit, Tiburcio Vasquez, is rumored to have sought refuge in the area.

In 1906, the Pinkerton family moved to Pacific Grove so that the children could continue their education beyond what the one-room Pleyto school could provide. In 1917, William Pinkerton died and the ranch was divided, but was later bought by the Hearst Ranch. Once again the property changed hands when the Hunter Liggett Military Reservation was established and the U.S. Army became the owner.

Today powerboats and waterskiers make waves where once Indians, Mexican Dons and early pioneers made history.

FORT ROMIE

In 1889, Fredrick St. George de Latour Booth Tucker, commander of the Salvation Army in the United States, was promoting his project, The Landless Man to the Manless Land. His plan included supplying land to destitute city people and training them for agriculture.

The Army bought a 600 acre tract near Soledad mission from Charles Romie and named their commune after him. Land was divided into ten acre parcels. Everything was provided the settlers from seeds to two-room shacks. In exchange, they contracted to make yearly payments of \$65 per acre for ten years after which the colonists would own the land.

About twenty families answered an advertisement in a San Francisco paper. Unfortunately, most of the people knew nothing about farming. They were plagued by a three year drought, wind, dust and inadequate water supply. The majority of the families moved away from "Fort Ruin."

After irrigation was provided by Spreckels Sugar Company and the Salvation Army, a new contingent of settlers with farm backgrounds were allotted plots of twenty acres per family, at \$100 an acre payable over a twenty year period. By 1905, a stabilized group of families lived on and drew a living from the land. A communal store, school and Methodist Episcopal Church were constructed. In 1914 a R.F.D. mail route was established.

After several title exchanges, the original Fort Romie tract was split up four ways, becoming part of the holdings of the Vosti, Binacca, Frolli and Dudgeon families.

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