

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

March 28, 1950

A Link With the Past

To visit and to know Mrs. Mary Vagnozzi of San Benancio Canyon, was a pleasure which I was privileged to enjoy one day last week. Mrs. Vagnozzi was born Mary Ambrosia in Monterey 86 years ago and still enjoys talking of her childhood, when she played among the old adobe ruins and attended school in the El Cuartel and at Colton Hall.

Mrs. Vagnozzi's father, Frank Ambrosio, was 13 years old when he left his native Portugal to seek his fortune on the sea. He arrived in Monterey during the gold rush and was married here to Maria de la Rosa, a native of the Azores. They established a home on a lot on Oliver street, directly back of the Casa Verde, now marked as the Charles Warren Stoddard lodging place; and extending back to the First Brick House. The house was partly adobe and partly frame made from ironwood as was the first wooden house built in 1840 and now destroyed. It had four rooms, two in front and two in the back, with a kitchen wing and in the center a large cistern to hold the rain water.

To Mr. and Mrs. Ambrosia were born five children: Frank Ambrosia, Mary who is Mrs. Vagnozzi; Ida who became Mrs. Benito Dias; Ana and Joe. The latter passed away several years ago.

The late Benito Dias was the great-grandson of Benito Dias who signed the petition on February 2nd, 1852, which it was hoped would be passed by the State Legislature then meeting in San Jose, to make Monterey an incorporated city. This came to pass on April 20, 1852.

Mrs. Vagnozzi's husband, George, came to Monterey from Italy and became a member of the fishing colony here. To them were born seven children, of which two daughters and one son are living. Mrs. Kenneth Doolittle of Monterey is a granddaughter and it was Mrs. Doolittle who took me to call upon this very kindly woman who has lived a lifetime in this part of California, whose mind is as keen as it ever was and who thinks of Monterey as the lazy, delightful place it was in her childhood, although she admits that it was "dirty and run down." She is the grandmother of nine and the great-grandmother of 11 children.

Mrs. Vagnozzi tells of her father as having been a whaler, of her many visits as a child to the whaling station on Decatur Street where the cook there would feed the children the "best bread just out of the oven." Never has bread tasted so good since then to Mrs. Vagnozzi. Her father had a number of two room shacks down on the beach below the Custom House, where Pop Ernest's is now, where they kept the nets and where the whalers slept.

This 86 year old native daughter of Monterey remembers hearing her father tell of the life in Portugal, tending the cows in the field near the ocean and of one day seeing a ship approaching the landing near by. He rushed down to the water edge and when he recognized the captain as being the best dressed man, he approached him and asked to sail with him when the ship left. He was understood mostly through his motions but the captain said "Yes, yes," so he rushed home and told his mother that he was sailing away. He told his children in later years here in Monterey, that his mother cried because she had already parted with two sons, one went to Brazil and the other "went north." Mrs. Ambrosia returned to Portugal once to visit with his parents. Several years later he met his brother, Joe Ambrosia, who had settled in Santa Cruz and the two became partners in farming.

First they settled in Moro Cojo and then "squatted" at Chualar but left there because of the floods each winter from the river. Over 80 years ago Mr. Ambrosia bought up different "squats" up the San Benancio Canyon, and also some acreage from Watson, who was the lighthouse keeper at Pacific Grove in the early days, and developed a large and well stocked ranch there. Upon his death it was divided among his children, Frank, Mary, Ana and Ida.

Frank Ambrosia's widow, Mrs. Emma Ambrosia, resides in Pacific Grove, but her girlhood home was in Boronda Adobe on the Mesa, now the residence of Dr. and Mrs. Mast Wolfson. Their portion of the old ranch property has been sold, but the three daughters have retained their shares. Mrs. Vagnozzi lives all alone in her home overlooking the valley below and from where on clear days she can see the streets of Monterey and in the evening can enjoy the twinkling lights of the city. She does her own work, has a flock of chickens, turkeys and a lone and beautiful peacock, the mate having died a short time ago.

Mrs. Vagnozzi says that when she went to school in the El Cuartel it was "dark and rickety and the children were scared." When they moved to Colton Hall it was clean. There were two rooms upstairs and two downstairs. She and her brother, Frank, went to the Corral de Tierra School after they moved to the ranch. They left home as early as they could in the morning with their lard pail lunch buckets and always corned beef sandwiches, but the distance was so far they seldom arrived on time and with the long walk uphill and downhill, they were too tired to learn much. It was seldom daylight when they arrived back home again.

There were several very good fresh water wells up the hill on Scott Street, Mrs. Vagnozzi remembers. The one at a corner in the garden at the Pacific building was where her family went each day for water as much of the water from other wells was salty. Jack Swan had another good well on the property which is now known as the First Theater and there was still another near an old adobe she remembers at the corner of Scott and Van Buren. A cow was kept by most all the old residents and many had horses and some sort of vehicle.