Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Colorful Sepulvedas

Senor Don Francisco Xavier Sepulveda, founder of a large and well-known family in Alta California, was the grandfather of Senor Don Jose Andres Sepulveda, who in turn, was the grandfather of Ismaela Marta Lanfranco de Polk, about whom we wrote in an earlier issue of the Peninsula Diary. Her story of early day fiestas, customs, and dress of the young ladies of that period in California's history is fascinating.

The Lanfranco girls, whose father was said to have been an Italian prince, were high spirited. Three of the girls were sent to Lauren Hall, a boarding school in the north. They sailed off accompanied by a duenna or chaperone on one of great-grandfather's ships but were all so seasick that they refused to return home, spending their vacations at the old Palace Hotel in San Francisco.

Home they came, though, upon hearing of the tremendous family fiesta planned to celebrate the completion of the first railroad built from Los Angeles to the Sepulveda rancho at San Pedro. They all sat on boxes and when the train pulled into the new adobe station on the rancho, they were met by the musicians on horseback and singers; then they big festivities began, gayety such as one relives at Santa Barbara's Old Spanish Day Fiesta or at Monterey's Merienda on the third of June each year, the anniversary of Portola's and Father Serra's first visit to Monterey.

Mrs. Gordon Seaverns Armsby of Santa Barbara, a descendant of the Sepulveda family, relates this early day story: "The old spicy spirit would sparkle whenever mother told how the family adobe built by grandfather Lanfranco for his bride was replaced by a red hand-hewn building which in turn gave way to the City of Los Angeles' Civic Center. The Lanfranco girls received very little money from the City of Los Angeles, but mamma and her sisters won an important moral victory. When they heard that the public lavatories were to be built on a portion of their land, they were horrified at the thought and raised such a fury that the municipality assured them that yes, indeed, the lavatories would be built….elsewhere; that of course the senoras' delicate wish would be respected."

A portrait of Don Jose Andres Sepulveda, painted by a French artist Penelope about 1856, is now on display in the Charles W. Bowers Memorial Museum in Santa Ana, together with his striking costume and accoutrements. These historic items were seen and enjoyed recently by the author of the Peninsula Diary.

Robert Glass Cleland, a member of the Research staff of the Huntington Library, writes of Sepulveda: "It has been said of Don Jose Andres Sepulveda, one of the most picturesque figures of the post-Gold Rush era, and owner of the two grants that made up the Rancho San Joaquin, that he won romantic distinction for his great landholdings, fast race horses, reckless wagers, open handed hospitality, and the elegance of his costumes." The latter description of our leading character very definitely shows in the elegance of the gentleman's attire which we inspected with great interest.

Long before California's change of sovereignty, Sepulveda had become famous—or notorious—for his love of horse racing and the prodigality of his wagers. His passion and audacity increased with the coming of the Americans. Probably his crowning achievement was the defeat of his chief rival, Pio Pico, in the most famous race in early California history. In 1846, when Pio Pico's governorship and the Mexican regime came to a simultaneous end in California history, the two brothers Pio and Andrew, were among the three or four largest landowners in the state. Like Sepulveda, they were also passionately devoted to horse racing and indulged quite as freely as Don Jose in the reckless wagers of the time.

Gambling losses, extravagances of dress, too lavish hospitality—whatever the cause, the owner of the Rancho San Joaquin was soon caught in a slough of debt from which he never successfully escaped. A rough memorandum of the early fifties lists the names of at least a dozen creditors to whom Jose Sepulveda owned a total of over $7,000, in amounts running from a few hundred dollars to over four thousand. Interest rates on these notes were four, five, six or seven percent a month, compounded!—and the list contained only a few of the ranchero's many debts. In 1855, the prodigal-spending Don Jose placed a mortgage of $15,000 on the Rancho San Joaquin with Samuel Morse Jr. The interest rate was three and a half percent a month. Shortly after paying back this loan, Sepulveda and his wife Francisca, borrowed $10,000 from an ex-trapper, Santa Fe trader and distinguished pueblo citizen, William Wolfskill.

Dr. Cleland goes on to relate: "Presumably borrowing funds from other sources, the debt-ridden ranchero succeeded in paying the two judgements, but his time

was running out. On December 6, 1864, when the great drought was at its height, Don Jose Sepulveda, symbol of an era brief, colorful as a desert sky at sunset, and touched with the pathos of a past that never can return, sold the Rancho San Joaquin, a principality of eleven square leagues of fifty thousand acres, more or less, for eighteen thousand dollars, and other valuable conditions." The deed was recorded on December 7, 1864.