

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Florencio and Rita

Today we continue the history of Casa Serrano, and old historic adobe building on Pacific street, south of Franklin, once the home of Florencio Serrano and his wife, Rita de la Torre, the daughter of two of Monterey's best-known citizens.

When Florencio first met Rita de la Torre we do not know, but the flashing-eyed girl must have seemed like an impossible dream to the young man who struggled so hard at first to get started.

Mrs. Kneass, curator at the old Pacific Building, tells us that the bride was the younger daughter of a prominent family in Monterey. Her father was Joaquin de la Torre who had been born in Ruenes, in the mountains of Santander, Spain, a young son of the proud de la Torre family, and sent to Mexico as Spanish cadet in the Army. He came to California in 1801, and two years later married at San Carlos Church Maria de los Angeles Cota, daughter of Pablo Antonio Cota. Maria de los Angeles Cota was related to many of the prominent families of California; the Vallejos, the Carrillos, the Lugos, etc. In 1821 Joaquin petitioned the governor for a rancho, stating that he had served the nation 21 years, and had a large family with seven children, and being then partially an invalid, needed the land on which to retire and raise his family. He was granted Bolsa del Potrero Rancho by Gov. Pablo Sola on June 1822, consisting of 6,915 acres.

The de la Torre family maintained a home in Monterey, and it was here that Rita was raised. The adobe at the corner of Pierce and Jefferson former home of Mr. and Mrs. Myron Oliver, was the de la Torre residence. Rita had all the fire and pride of her Spanish born father, and of the Cotas. Her godparents were W.E.P Hartnell and his wife, and as she grew to womanhood, she was welcome in all the best homes of Monterey, attending the fiestas and bailes with the other guarded young señoritas of Monterey. But at times her temper could flash out.

There was the time that a group of mountain men wandered into Monterey, and the gentlefolk of the town looked at them wondering at their strange dress, their long rifles, and buckskin garments. One afternoon Rita and an older sister, Maria, were out behind their

home cutting a large beef for a party and supervising the Indians of the household. Unseen by the girls one of the mountaineers slipped casually into the yard and coming up behind them slid his arms around Maria's waist. Poor Maria froze in horror, unable to scream or run. Not Rita! She grabbed the long knife, and in a few moments, Monterey was electrified by the sight of a long-legged man, his buckskin fringe flying running down the street with little Rita, eyes flashing and knife brandishing, behind him.

This story is a humorous bit of history told to us by Mrs. Kneass, who has, in past years, made a study in research and personal contact, with many of the old families in Monterey.

Florencio courted and won the daughter of Don Joaquin. He bought the property on Calle Estrada (now Pacific street) from a foreigner who had started but not finished a house there. Calling a workman, Florencio had strong floors laid, windows and doors put in, and prepared a home for his bride-to-be. They were married in July, 1845, and there they lived a good life, raising a large family of sons and daughters. There Florencio had his school and brought education to Monterey. And there he died.

What better judgment of a man can we find than the words of Hubert Howe Bancroft, the great California historian. "A man of pure European blood, of fair education, and good repute, he was somewhat superior to his associates. Before his death he dictated his 'Apuntes para la Historia de California,' in which he gives full statement of his life and recollection of California affairs, throwing light upon many important topics, in excellent language and entertaining style. The manuscript is a voluminous one, and I look upon it as one of the most valuable in my collection."