

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Count Was Link With Spanish Era

Another segment of Monterey's colorful history slipped away quietly one day in September of 1942 with the sudden passing of Augustine "Count" de Soto, who was as much a part of local history as anything to be found in the schoolbooks. He was one of the last links with the Spanish period in California.

The "count," a native of Monterey, and believed to be about 70 years of age at the time of his death, lived for most of his life in the old family home, an adobe at the end of Via Joaquin, just off Eldorado street from Pacific. This adobe now is occupied by Dr. Scott Heath, as his office. It was bought from the descendants of the Soto family by Mrs. Mary Greene and restored by her in 1950.

We remember the count as occupying the bench at the corner of Alvarado and Pearl streets - sitting in the sun discussing with old timers the exciting days of yore. He always was colorful, sporting a bright-colored, if sometimes slightly soiled, bandana tied cowboy fashion about his neck.

He always was a good storyteller for the pleasure of all who would listen, including the time that he was chosen to raise the flag on Colton Hall during the visit of President McKinley. He was a lad in school, so he said, and remembered well the salute which was carried out by setting off a blast of black powder under an anvil.

There always was an air of mystery about the count, according to the stories written about him at the time of his death, which never have been cleared up. Not the least interesting phase of the many mysteries was his continued insistence that he possessed several volumes of early county records of inestimable value. On several occasions, he had said, persons had tried to lure away these treasures, some of the efforts having been made by professors of some large universities. No one ever offered the true worth of these possessions, however, he declared.

Augustine was the grandson of Joaquin, who built the adobe in 1827. The city took the wooden house fronting the adobe for taxes and condemned it. Augustine refused to move out. Finally, the city evicted the family, paid their rent elsewhere for a month, and tore down the wooden structure. So, the count moved into the old

adobe, the first occupant for many years. He refused again to move with his family.

It took Mrs. Greene one year to search and clear title to the property, which had been involved in litigation for many years, blocking other attempts to buy it. But Mrs. Greene was determined to own it, so she traveled from north to south all over California, visiting the Soto families until she finally came to an agreement with all and was able to acquire the adobe and the land.

Litigation began at the time of Joaquin Soto's death 109 years ago. Copies of the petition for probate of will still are on file in the county clerk's office. In this will, Soto left his various properties to his wife, Dona Maria del Carman Castro, and his nine children.

From the time of Joaquin Soto's death until June 27, 1929, the taxes were paid on the property - which totaled one and one-half acres - by the late Robert Hannah, administrator of the estate, at least as far back as 1905. In 1929-30 Harry L. Noland of Salinas, in whose hands the property was finally placed, filed a quiet title action to the property and from 1929 Mrs. Lillian Hannah of San Francisco paid the taxes until the old historic adobe was purchased by Mrs. Greene.

Mrs. Greene now is in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, building another adobe building and planning to live in it for many years to come. Dr. and Ms. Heath now are spending their days in the Casa de Soto and enjoying life to the utmost.