

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Birth of a Town

Castroville was part of El Rancho Bolsa Nueva y Moro Cojo, a 40,000-acre Spanish-Mexican grant to Simeon Castro and Maria Antonio Pico de Castro. The grant included the present boundaries of Fort Ord.

The town was founded in 1863 by the Castros' children and heirs:

Juan Bautista Castro, an early Monterey County supervisor; Gen. Manuel Castro, who in 1846 fought Gen. John Charles Fremont at El Gabilan, or Fremont's peak; Maria Antonio Castro de Sanchez, wife of Rafael Sanchez y Galvan, one of the county's first attorneys; Juan Castro de Merritt, who became the first superior judge in the county, and three younger brothers, Leandro Jose, Jose Antonio and Jose Francisco Castro.

A site was immediately chosen for a Catholic church and rectory. They were built and the church named La Iglesia de Nuestra Senora del Refugio – "Church of Our Lady of Refuge."

During those early years, successful church bazaars were held in the town hall. This two-story wooden building still stands on the main street. In later years an Episcopal Church was erected in the other end of town.

A unique and small Chinatown, one block in length, bordered the town on the east side. A tract of land on the north end of Castroville was given for a cemetery.

The population consisted mostly of Irish and Portuguese with a smattering of Chinese and was a thriving community before the founding of Salinas and Watsonville.

Castroville boasted one of the first hospitals in the county, built and operated by Dr. James George Martin, whose wife was Guadalupe de Allen, heroine of Ann Fisher's "Cathedral in the Sun" and daughter of George Allen, early Monterey settler. The hospital was later destroyed by fire.

The St. James Hotel, erected and run by the James Murphy family, and a lovely small park stood near the Southern Pacific depot. Southern Pacific built the roundhouse and operated it there for many years before moving to Salinas.

One of the leading papers in California in early days was the Castroville Argus, published by Juan Bautista Castro. Young and brilliant Joseph Merritt, eldest son of Judge Merritt, was the editor.

The old brick building, now remodeled, standing on Merritt street, was built by Manuel Merritt and Townsend Wood, father of Mrs. Ethel Little of Monterey and the late Mrs. Charles Kiernan, a grain broker and owner of a general store.

Juan B. Cooper, believing in the future of Castroville, built his imposing two-story residence on the north end of Merritt street. It was one of the largest and handsomest in the county, standing in the center of a block and surrounded by a formal garden. Still showing traces of its former grandeur, it now is a rooming house.

Other homes of note were the Juan B. Castros' charming rambling white house, with a vine-covered porch surrounding the front and side, green shuttered and enclosed with a picket fence. The home stood on Merritt street. Another was the white-gabled Walsh residence, erected on one of the side streets, surrounded by a lovely old-fashioned garden and high-trimmed cypress hedge.

During Castroville's middle years of prosperity, a well-stocked livery stable with both horses and vehicles catered to the wants of the town's gay young blades.

Castroville is surrounded by rich, fertile land, and in its heyday dairy farming, potato and grain raising were the chief industries.

The potatoes and wheat were packed in farm wagons drawn by six-horse teams to Moss Landing and shipped from there by boat to all parts of California and to Eastern markets. Now Castroville is lettuce, artichokes and beets and is known as the artichoke capital of the world.