

# Land of Memories

## Glimpses of Old Ranchos Survive

By DAN LOGAN

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**B**efore the Gold Rush, California was a backwater. In 1830, only 4,000 to 5,000 people—not including unbaptized Indians—lived in the state. Cattle wandered free across the fenceless countryside, and the Mexican government paid little attention to record keeping and boundaries when it granted large parcels of land to a few lucky men.

The land grants were the basis of modern Orange County history. While our lives may not seem connected to those settlers of 150 or more years ago, we are still tied to the past by words and memories—and by four artifacts that have survived the development of the original ranchos.

Amid modern-day housing tracts, you can find evidence that history is close at hand.

### RANCHO SAN JOAQUIN

What is now the Rancho San Joaquin golf course on the San Diego Creek in Irvine was, for more than 100 years, a hub of cattle and sheep ranching. The marshy land north of the Newport Back Bay stretched all the way to Red Hill in Tustin; in fact, the land was swampy enough that wagons had to avoid it by swinging further north, according to Irvine archeologist Stephen O'Neil.

Rancho San Joaquin had originally been granted to Jose Andres Sepulveda, a dandyish rancher who thrived on horse racing and gambling. At some point Sepulveda, whose hacienda stood near what is now First Street and the Santa Ana River, built the adobe on the creek site as an outpost for his riders.

In 1864, hamstrung by debt, Sepulveda sold the rancho's 50,000 acres to James Irvine Sr. and his partners for \$18,000. By 1869, Irvine owned 110,000 acres of land and 40,000 sheep.

In 1868, Irvine built a new headquarters only a few yards from the adobe site. The adobe deteriorated, its shrinking walls eventually becoming covered over.

It wasn't until builders excavated the foundation for the Rancho San Joaquin golf course clubhouse and discovered a wall that anyone realized that part of the adobe still existed. The site has been fenced in, but the remains were covered over to protect them, and nothing is visible within the enclosure.

The headquarters that Irvine built has been turned into the

Irvine Historical Museum. It was only quite recently, in 1969, that the Rancho San Joaquin condominiums were begun on the site. A 1964 photo in the museum shows cowhands and cattle clustered near the building, with the sand traps and greens of the new golf course visible in the background.

### CANON DE SANTA ANA

At busy Esperanza Road and Echo Hill Lane in Yorba Linda, a stone marker barely noticeable from the road reminds passers-by that this was once the site of the Hacienda San Antonio. The hacienda, an impressive two-story, 18-room mansion, was home to the family, guests and workers of Bernardo Yorba.

Bernardo Yorba's story began when his father, Jose Antonio Yorba, who had been a member of the Portola expedition in 1769, was granted the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana in 1810. This was the only Spanish grant in Orange County, according to Orange County historian Don Meadows.

In 1834, Bernardo Yorba was granted the Rancho Canon de San-

ORANGE COUNTY  
HISTORY  
(Reference  
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ta Ana, 13,328 acres of land by the Mexican governor. Yorba eventually became so land-rich that he could ride all day on horseback in any direction without leaving his property.

Bernardo Yorba's life was fruitful even beyond the development of his great estate; he had 21 children by three wives. When he died in 1858 he was buried in Los Angeles, but later his body was returned to the family cemetery on the hill above his house.

The estate broke up as the heirs sold their shares. The hacienda was torn down in 1926 and replaced by a barley field.

A few blocks away from the hacienda site, the Yorba Cemetery on Parkwood Court now borders a small county park where children play baseball on the lawn. There's a well-known ghost story associated with the graveyard that has kept local history alive—if somewhat garbled and embellished—in the minds of the neighborhood children.

On December 2, 1910, Alvina de Los Reyes, who was 31, died in a carriage accident as she was returning home from a party. She

was supposed to have been wearing a pink formal gown. A ghost known as the Pink Lady is reputed to appear as a pink mist over her grave. Orange County historian Pamela Hallan-Gibson says the tale has it that the Pink Lady appears in June in every even-numbered year.

## RANCHO TRABUCO

*Trabuco* was the term for a Spanish musket, and Rancho Trabuco earned its name when a member of Gaspar de Portola's expeditionary force lost his musket in the area in 1769.

The original Rancho Trabuco grant of about 7,000 acres went to Santiago Arguello in 1841. Two years later the land was purchased by John Forster, and an additional grant to Forster brought the total to 22,000 acres.

Today, the ruins of a shepherd's adobe above the Arroyo Trabuco are the most visible remains of the rancho years. The adobe lies toward the southern end of the long spine of O'Neill Park, and it takes 20 minutes for Orange County Park Ranger Scott Smith to reach it in a

four-wheel-drive truck on dirt roads.

A stone memorial marking the adobe site is lost in the tall weeds, and the remains of the adobe are sealed up in a wooden shed that appears much smaller than the adobe remains shown in a photograph from the 1930s.

Despite the long ride to the site through the park, the adobe ruins are only a couple of hundred feet away from new homes in Rancho Santa Margarita, which will be a community of 40,000 people within a decade. In the far distance, across the arroyo, more homes are appearing on the hillsides in Mission Viejo.

## RANCHO BOCA DE LA PLAYA

The Rancho Boca de la Playa was granted to Emigdio Vejar in 1846. Vejar moved into an adobe that is believed to have been a hidden storage house for the San Juan Capistrano mission, according to Hallan-Gibson. In 1869, Juan Avila, the grantee for Rancho Niguel, bought the property from

Vejar.

A tragic love story is told about Juan Avila's daughter Rosa, who was married to Pablo Pryor. It was Rosa Avila Pryor's habit each morning to serve her husband a drink made of milk and eggs and sugar. One morning in 1878, she took the drink to him while he lay in bed. When he tasted it, he complained that it tasted bad. Rosa tried it, just as Pablo realized the drink had been poisoned with strychnine, which was used to kill squirrels.

Rosa's family was able to save her, but Pablo Pryor died at age 33. Rosa dressed in black for the rest of her life, and she and her six children lived with her father.

Some years later, an Indian employee of Pablo Pryor's wrote to Rosa and admitted that he had poisoned the couple.

Today, the adobe is a private residence owned by a descendant of the Pryors, according to Hallan-Gibson. It is bordered by a mobile home park and a Price Club.

Dan Logan is a regular contributor to Orange County Life.

## LIVING ON A LAND GRANT

Where you live today is on one of the original ranchos, created when the Mexican government seized property controlled by the Missions under the Secularization Act of 1833 and granted millions of acres of land to Mexican citizens (either native or naturalized). Citizens were able to petition the Mexican Republic for land if they were Catholics who had the ability to raise crops or cattle. They also had to be willing to live on the property.

Of the 700 grants made or reconfirmed throughout California between 1833 and 1846, 20 were either all or partially within today's Orange County's borders.

The names of the original families and their ranchos should sound familiar to you: several present day streets and cities were named after them.

**1. Rancho Boca de la Playa:** 6,607 acres were granted to Justice of the Peace Emigdio Vejar in 1846, who sold it 23 years later to Juan Avila. The rancho was then acquired by Juan Forster, a major regional landowner.

**2. Rancho Bolsa Chica:** 8,107 acres were granted to Joaquin Ruiz in 1841, then became part of Abel Stearns' holdings. Through marriage and land purchase, Stearns became the largest landowner in Southern California.

**3. Rancho Canada de los Alisos:** The "glen of the alders" was granted in 1842 to Jose Serrano. When supplemented by a later grant in 1846, the Serrano property swelled to 10,668 acres. It became the Whiting Ranch in the 1880s.

**4. Rancho Canon de Santa Ana:** The 13,328-acre rancho was granted in 1834 to Bernardo Yorba, the most prosperous of Jose Antonio Yorba's sons. Bernardo eventually acquired land that extended his holdings from Riverside County to Newport Bay.

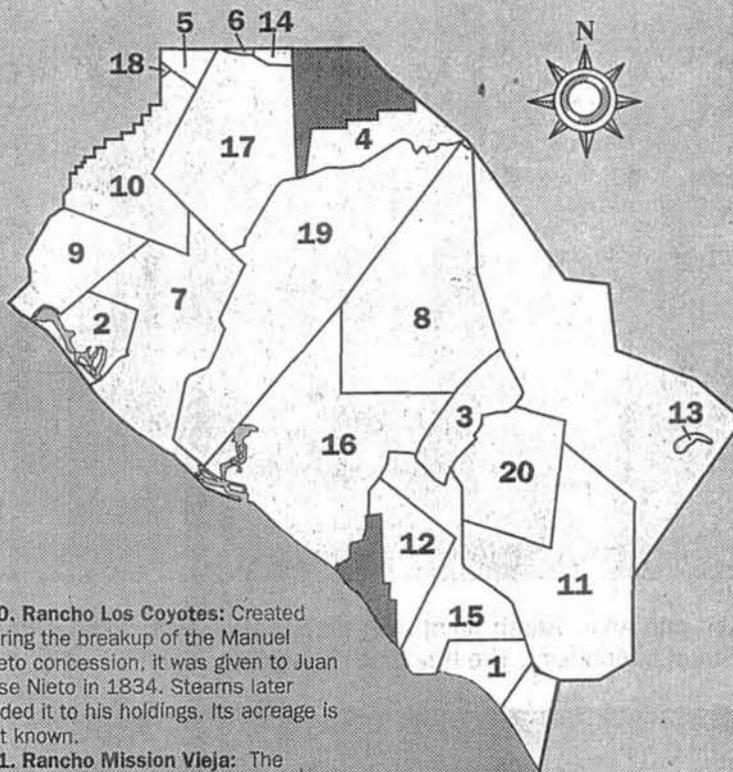
**5. Rancho La Habra:** This rancho was granted in 1839 to Mariano R. Roldan by Manuel Jimeno on behalf of the Mexican nation. The acreage is not known. Andres Pico acquired the land, and it was later sold to Stearns.

**6. Rancho La Puente:** The 48,790-acre rancho, mostly in L.A. County, was granted in 1845 to John Rowland and William Workman, trappers who had brought a party of Americans to California from New Mexico in 1841.

**7. Rancho Las Bolsas:** Granted in 1784, it became part of former soldier Manuel Nieto's vast concession. Las Bolsas was created when Nieto heirs asked for a partition of the larger grant. In 1834, the land was given to Catarina Ruiz, the widow of one of the Nietos. By 1851, ownership was in dispute. Ramon Yorba and Jose Justo Morillo each claimed a half-interest. Stearns later became full owner. The acreage of the rancho is not known.

**8. Rancho Lomas de Santiago:** 47,266 acres were granted in 1846 to Teodocio Yorba, son of Jose Antonio Yorba. It later was acquired by James Irvine Sr. in deeds dated 1868 and 1876 from his partners who had purchased the land for 15 cents an acre.

**9. Rancho Los Alamitos:** Part of the larger 1784 Manuel Nieto concession. The acreage is not known. It was later acquired by Stearns.



**10. Rancho Los Coyotes:** Created during the breakup of the Manuel Nieto concession, it was given to Juan Jose Nieto in 1834. Stearns later added it to his holdings. Its acreage is not known.

**11. Rancho Mission Vieja:** The 46,435-acre rancho was granted to Antonio Estudillo in 1841 under the name Rancho La Paz, but Estudillo failed to meet conditions of ownership set by Mexican law. He sold it to Augustin Olivera in 1845, who sold it to Forster two days after the title was confirmed. The rancho's name was changed to Rancho Mission Vieja.

**12. Rancho Niguel:** The 13,316-acre rancho was granted in 1842 to Juan Avila, then acquired by Lewis F. Moulton in the 1890s to become Moulton Ranch.

**13. Rancho Potrero los Pinos:** This was one of three small pastures in

what is now Cleveland National Forest granted in 1845 to Forster. The other two potreros are now in Riverside County. The size of the three in an 1866 title was 1,167 acres.

**14. Rancho Rincon de la Brea:** The rancho was first owned by Gil Ybarra of Los Angeles, a former town council member who received the grant in 1841. Its size is not known.

**15. Rios Tract:** This seven-acre parcel of land was within the boundaries of Rancho Boca de la Playa. It was granted to Santiago Rios in 1843.

**16. Rancho San Joaquin and Rancho La Cienega de las Ranas:** The combined 48,803 acres of the two ranchos were given to Jose Andres Sepulveda in 1837 and 1842. He was a hospitable rancher who owned fast horses. His ranchos later were joined with Lomas de Santiago and a portion of Santiago de Santa Ana to form the Irvine Ranch.

**17. Rancho San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana:** 35,970 acres were granted in 1837 to Juan Pacifico Ontiveros, an early-day resident of Los Angeles who had served in the Spanish army.

**18. Rancho Santa Gertrudes:** Another part of the 1784 Nieto concession. Nieto lived on this rancho southwest of what is now Whittier. After the breakup of the concession, Figuero granted the rancho to Josefa Cota de Nieto.

**19. Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana:** Jose Antonio Yorba, a retired sergeant of the presidio in San Diego, who had been a Portola party corporal and one of the first Europeans to see the Santa Ana River, was granted 62,516 acres along the river in 1810. Cities of Orange, Santa Ana, Costa Mesa, Tustin and Villa Park are all or partly on this land. In 1868, the rancho was divided among 100 claimants (including Yorba and Peralta relatives and Stearns). Attorneys A.B. Chapman and Andrew Glassell received land that became the city of Orange in exchange for their legal advice.

**20. Rancho Trabuco:** A third of the rancho was granted in 1841 to Santiago Arguello, who sold his interest to Forster two years later. Forster obtained the additional two-thirds of the rancho giving him a total of 22,000 acres.

Source: *The Title Insurance and Trust Co. of Los Angeles, Incorporated in 1893, now known as Titor Title Insurance Co. of California.*