

II. Two Hundred Years Ago

It was a wild and beautiful place two hundred years ago--the mountains, the valleys, and seashore that would become Santa Cruz County.

Blacktail deer browsed in the hillside thickets of chaparral brush. The mountain lion made his den high in the rocks, and the grizzly bear roamed the sunny slopes hunting for one of his favorite tidbits--gophers. The bluejay squawked and scolded as he flashed through the trees. And those trees! The redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) marched up every canyon, along every stream, and seemed to touch the sky they were so tall. The oaks spread their magnificent arms wide over the hillsides, which were brilliant green with new grass in winter and spring, and dry gold in the summer sun. Little creeks ran down every wooded canyon. Two rivers flowed strong and pure to plunge into the waters of Monterey Bay.

In the southern part of the county, which was to become the Pajaro Valley, a small herd of tule elk grazed and moved with the sun and wind. In the waters offshore, sea otters dove and played, bringing up abalones which they cracked open with a stone, then ate at their leisure while lolling on their backs, floating in the water. Fish jumped in the sparkling waves, fleeing the sea lions which chased and ate them. Gulls combed the beaches for carrion while pelicans and sea ducks flew low over the waters of the bay looking for fish near the surface.

The only sounds in the land were the calls of the animals and birds, the rushing and breaking of the waves, the storms, and the wind in the trees. Even the wind was stilled when the soft gray fog drifted in over the land. Then, the only sound might be the drip-drip-drip of dew in the deep redwood forests.

In certain places there were other sounds--human sounds--the soft moccasined step of the Ohlone Indian hunter, the twang of his bowstring, and the thud of the arrow finding its mark.

Near the Ohlone settlements the fragrance of wood smoke hung in the air and mingled with the shouts and laughter of the Indian children. They were a happy people. They hunted and fished and gathered acorns under the oak trees in the fall, from which the women made a highly nutritious acorn flour. The women dug edible roots and gathered those grass seeds which were good to eat, and they wove some very fine baskets. They were tightly woven works of art, those baskets, often decorated with tiny beads laboriously carved from clam shells and with small tufts of feathers from the quail's topknot. (It is sad to have to report that today only one of those Ohlone baskets exists in the Santa Cruz City Museum.)

When the weather turned cool, the Ohlones wore animal skins and sometimes coated their own skin with a layer of mud. In warm weather the women wore short skirts woven of tules.

Their homes were dome-shaped, formed by layering branches with coatings of mud. When an Indian house got too small or wore out, it was a simple thing to build another.

The women spent their days gathering food, cooking, and curing animal hides, while the men hunted and fished. The children were allowed to play freely until they reached a certain age. Then they began their education.

What education? you may ask.

The Ohlone Indians educated their children for life--for living, much as our public schools attempt to do today. The only difference was in the kind of life that was led.

Indian boys had to learn the arts of hunting and fishing and setting snares, or they and their families would go hungry. They had to learn which seasons were best and which places most likely for stalking a fat deer. And when they killed him with an arrow or a spear, they not only gained food, but they had his hide for moccasins and clothing, his horns for tools, his teeth for ornaments, his sinewy muscle fibers for thread, and his bones for needles and flutes. Every part of the animal was used for some practical purpose and nothing was wasted.

Children learned early that the grizzly bear would attack without provocation and was to be avoided at all costs. They learned to make fish line from plant fibers and arrows from the hazel bush. And they learned which plants, berries, and roots were edible and which were poisonous. The girls learned to sew skin clothing, to cook, and to make the beautiful baskets. Some of those baskets were so finely woven that they would hold water.

If the Indian children failed to learn these vital lessons, they could not survive as functioning adults in the life of the tribe.

On the lighter side of life there were songs and dances, stories of tribal history, games, and music. Guessing games were popular --which nut shell concealed the pebble?

When illness struck, the Ohlones went to the sweat house. There they sat in the steam and heat until they could no longer stand it. Then they dashed out to jump into a cold stream. The Indians did not have smallpox, the measles, or diphtheria until the pioneer

Spanish settlers brought those diseases of civilization with them. Then the Indians died by the hundreds. They had no natural immunity against the new diseases.

The earliest settlers, Spanish and Mexican, also brought a more formal kind of education to the Indians.

The forerunners of those earliest settlers stood at the edge of the San Lorenzo River on October 14, 1769. They looked about them at what would become the site of the Mision La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz--now referred to as Mission Santa Cruz. (Santa Cruz means "Holy Cross" in Spanish.) They named the river in honor of St. Lawrence.

Those men at the edge of the river were the party of Spanish explorers led by Don Gaspar de Portola in the first land exploration of the coast of Alta California. (Alta means "upper" and this was Upper California, in contrast to Baja or Lower California.) The explorers passed on along the coast after remarking what a fine location for a city this river plain afforded.

Things moved slowly in those days and 22 years passed before Mission Santa Cruz was founded by Padre Fermin Lasuen on August 28, 1791. The first Mission building of stone and adobe bricks was completed on May 19, 1794.

The Indians built it, with the Franciscan padres showing them how to work the clay, and that was one of the new lessons. The Indians also learned to raise fruits and vegetables, weave blankets, make saddles and boots, ride horses, herd cattle and sheep and pigs, and to wear clothing like that of the Spanish settlers.

Some of the Indians became Christians and were taught to read and write, and to sing in church. A few learned to make and play musical instruments. Others ran away to the hills to keep to the old ways of life.

The Franciscan padres intended to convert the Indians to Christianity, then educate them to take over their own affairs, but things didn't work out quite that way. After five or six years, life

at the Mission was routine, with Indians tending the herds and the crops of wheat, beans, corn, and other vegetables. Mission herds roamed from the area near Watsonville north to New Year's Point, with Indian herdsmen ever on guard against marauding mountain lions and grizzlies.

One of the earliest of the Mission's problems was those new diseases--new to the Indians. Epidemics swept through the settlement and whole Indian families died. Soon the padres were burying more neophytes--as they called the Christianized Indians--than they were baptizing.

Another problem for the padres arose with the founding of Villa Branciforte on the east side of the San Lorenzo River, across the river from the Mission, in the area where Branciforte Elementary School stands today. The Villa was one of three pueblos (the others were at Los Angeles and San Jose) established by the Spanish authorities with the aim of discouraging the Russians, French, or English from colonizing Alta California. The village was laid out in 1796 by Lieutenant Alberto de Cordova and settled in the next few years by convicts from Mexico seeking a better life and by young Spanish army officers and their families.

Although the Mission settlement and the Villa settlement were separated by the San Lorenzo River, the Villa with its horse races, bear and bull fights, and fandangos drew the Indians away from the Mission. The padres were dismayed. They had founded the Mission with the intent of educating the Indians, saving their souls, and then turning the land back to them. Instead, the Indians were fleeing the Mission.

This was a turbulent period in world history. Spain ruled approximately two-thirds of the known world, but its power was waning. King Carlos IV and his son, who became King Ferdinand VII, were struggling to retain control.

In 1822 Mexico, long under Spanish rule, freed itself and the California Missions found themselves under Mexican rule. In 1834 the Missions were taken from the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church and were secularized. Some Mission properties were divided among

the few remaining Indians. Other properties and herds were stolen or scattered.

Today the only remaining adobe building of the Santa Cruz Mission compound stands on School Street in Santa Cruz and poses something of a mystery. The exact date of this adobe's construction is unknown, although educated guesses place it anywhere between 1794 and 1810. Its purpose also is a matter for speculation. There are those who believe it was a guardhouse, others who think it might have been a school, and still others who say it probably was housing for the Christian Indian women. The fact that the building stands on School Street, which was named in the earliest days, would seem to lend credence to the school theory.

There are no records of a school at Villa de Branciforte, but the children of the Spanish Dons learned early to read, write, and keep accounts, being taught by their fathers and by the Mission padres. Emphasis was placed on the teachings of the Catholic faith. There were no Protestant families at the Mission until the 1840s. By that time there were about a dozen English-speaking residents.

The first Americans in the Santa Cruz County area in the late 1830s and early 1840s were adventurous hunters and trappers who followed the beaver trails and brought no wives or children. Schools were not needed. But by 1847 a handful of American families had settled in Santa Cruz, among them those of Nicholas Gann and Benjamin Case.

Benjamin and his wife, Mary Amney Case, crossed the plains in a covered wagon in 1847 and upon arriving in Santa Cruz--or "The Mission" as it was then called--built a home at the edge of Neary Lagoon. The Cases had one child of school age and Mary Case held classes in her home in 1848 and 1849--the first English school of record in Santa Cruz County.

Spanish was the language of Alta California and it was necessary to speak and write it in order to carry on any kind of business. But some of the new American settlers wanted their children to learn to read and write in English.

Mary taught her own child and three children of Joseph Majors; three children of Adna Hecox; two children each of Nicholas Dodero, the Widow Patterson, and Pruett Sinclair; and one child each of Eli Moore and Nicholas Gann. (Adna Hecox, a Methodist "exhorter" or preacher, served briefly as alcalde or mayor of the Mission settlement, as did Joseph Majors.)

Mary's school was in session only in the summers, when the children were not needed at home for farm work. She taught the three Rs plus some basic Christianity.

Imagine Mary Case, if you will, trying to find time to teach. She probably milked the family cow and raised a vegetable garden, she cooked and canned, she made all the family's clothing, and scrubbed it on washday by hand on a scrub board. The wash water had to be heated on a wood stove--the same stove she cooked on. Such pioneer women as Mary Amney Case had an iron determination that their children would not grow up illiterate. That was a day when illiteracy was common; many early Santa Cruz deeds and wills were signed with an "X" which had to be witnessed by literate persons in order to make the document legal. That also was a day when education was not considered essential for girls. Many of them were educated only in the arts of sewing, cooking, and keeping house. So it took an unusual strength of character for Mary Case to devote hours from her hard-working life to teach school. Nevertheless, she is considered by historians to have established the first secular, English-speaking school in Santa Cruz County.

Paper, pens, and ink were hard to come by in Alta California; where did she find slates for the children to use in writing and figuring? What books did she use--other than the Bible? It would be interesting to know these things, but we never will. No one recorded the details, and Mary Amney Case died, an old woman, in 1900 at the Santa Cruz home of her son, Rollin Case.

The West truly became the Land of Gold in January of 1848 when James Marshall picked gold nuggets out of John A. Sutter's millrace at Coloma. Everything seemed to happen at once. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the United States and Mexico in February of 1848 laid the foundations for Alta California to become part of the

United States. After the first wave of skepticism about the gold strike, Americans began to believe the fabulous news, and they poured into California by covered wagon, on foot, on horseback, by steamship, and by sailing vessel.

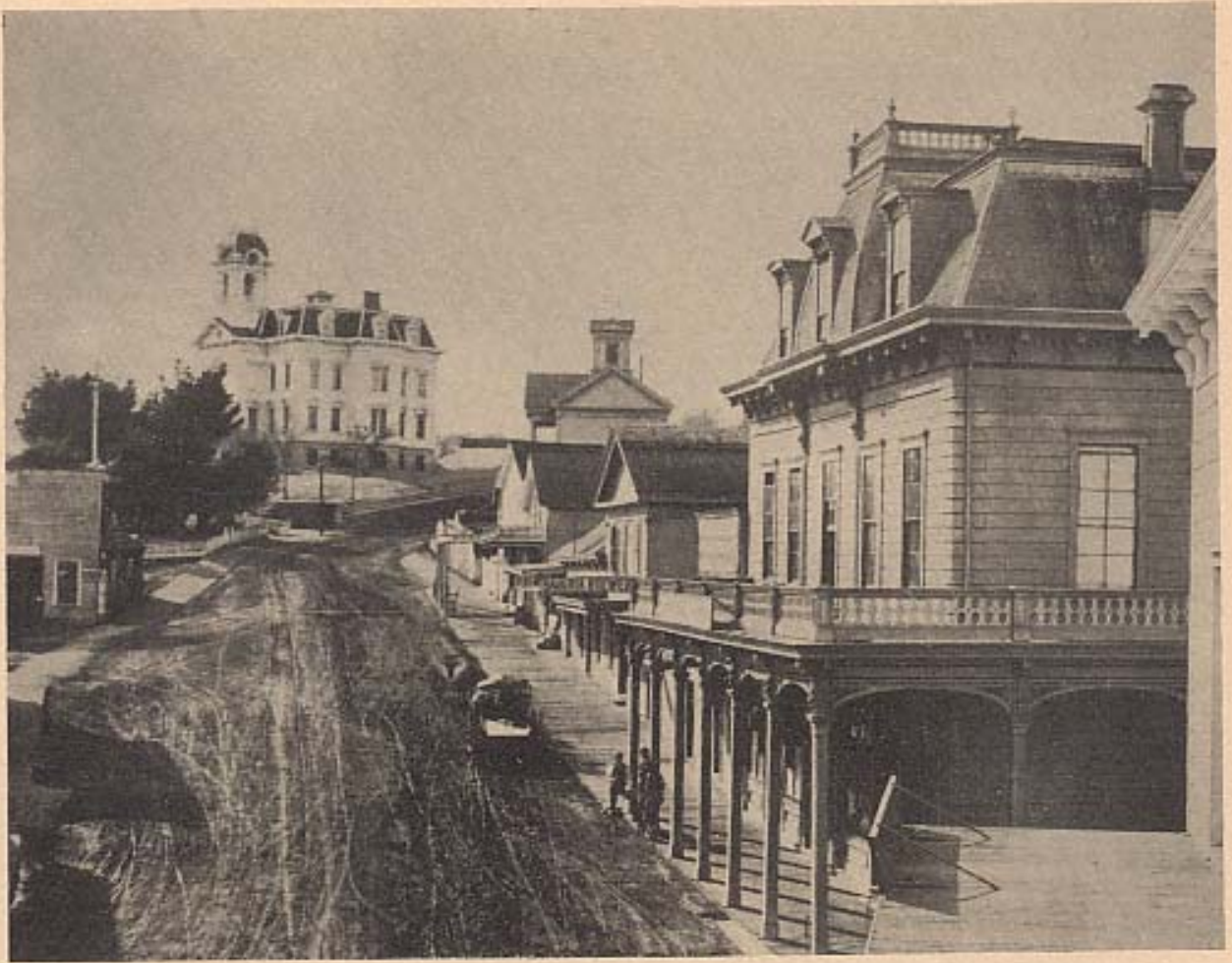
Two short years later, on September 9, 1850, the State of California was born with a golden spoon in its mouth, as the 31st state in the Union.

Santa Cruz County, which was actually created on February 18, 1850, was about seven months old when the state in which it was located was accepted into the Union.

There was confusion about the naming of Santa Cruz County. It was first called Branciforte County, but a few weeks later the name was changed to its present title. The county seat was established in the settlement of Santa Cruz, which was still called "the Mission."

So now there was a county with a county seat; there was a hotel (the Eagle, located in one of the old Mission adobe building); there was a combination store and home up on the hill near the Mission; there were families with children. But there was no public school building and no fund for establishing or operating one.

However, this situation was soon to change. Nine years after Mrs. Case held classes in her home, the new county's first public schoolhouse was built. During those years and the two decades that followed, the young school system took root and grew.



Would you believe Mission Street? This is the way it looked in the days before it was paved. Today the administration buildings of the Santa Cruz City School District sits on the hill. The old St. Charles Hotel and the Temperance Hall (note tower) on the right have gone, along with the smaller places of business.



A very early view of Mission Hill which is unique because it shows both the First Methodist Church where school was held before the first schoolhouse was built--and the first schoolhouse. It is at the left, the building with wings sprouting on either side, plus a small bell tower. Note orchards in the background--downtown today.



Mission Hill School, Santa Cruz District 1, built in 1879 to replace the original 1857 one-room Mission Hill School--the first public school structure in Santa Cruz County. The building shown above had a basement used for classes, two floors above that, and a top story in which the county's first high school was conducted.



Holy Cross Boarding and Day School in Santa Cruz filled a real need for orphaned children. Phyllis Bertorelli Patten entered this school as a child after her mother died.



Rare photo of a "ranch school," a private schoolhouse that the Steele family built on their dairy ranch, up the coast, in a day when roads were impassable much of the year. This area once was part of Santa Cruz County, later was given to San Mateo County.