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CASTRO HOME - CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

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by

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CASTRO HOME

In an old-fashioned sloping garden one hundred and fifty feet wide, bordered on the north by an auto court and on the south by a row of gigantic eucalyptus trees, stands the old Castro Adobe. Placed atop a slight eminence, one hundred and eighty feet away from busy San Pablo Avenue in El Cerrito, it presents a link between the busy present and the colorful and glamorous past.

To reach this historic old landmark from San Francisco, the visitor must cross the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and travel north on San Pablo Avenue to where Cerrito Creek forms the boundary line between Alameda and Contra Costa counties. There, on the west side of the avenue, sheltered by a small tiled roof, is a plaque, erected by the Junior Chamber of Commerce and Troop 26, Explorers, of the Boy Scouts of America, commemorating the granting of 17,938 acres of land to Francisco Maria Castro by Governor Jose Figueroa on June 12, 1834. This plaque marks the dividing line between the old Castro and Peralta ranchos as well as the boundary line of Contra Costa County. The adobe house is one hundred yards north of this plaque, and on the east side of San Pablo Avenue, near the north bank of the creek.

A broad graveled driveway winds back from the street

and, turning north beneath huge trees overgrown by dangling, trailing ivy, leads to the historic structure. Stately palms, interspersed with toyon, cacti, pine, acacia, and other shrubs and trees, cover the entire yard. Flowering eucalypti wave blood-red blossoms amid dark green foliage; miniature gardens and pools line the many by-paths. In front of the house are two immense trees that have been topped, and the tangle of vines growing over them trails down to the latticed front beneath the balcony of the second story of the central wing of the old building.

The Castro House is built like a fortress, in the shape of a U, making an almost complete hollow square. Each of the three adobe structures that form the hacienda is a distinct unit, separated from its neighbors by a space of three or four feet.[1]

The south wing, the original house built by Don Francisco Castro in 1823,[2] is some thirty feet in width and ninety feet long, with the regulation mission style comb roof with a sloping lean-to running the full length of the building. No doors open into this wing, except from the patio. Five windows that ventilate but do not illuminate,

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1. Information gathered on a field trip by the writer.
2. Dr. J. N. Bowman of Berkeley, whose book on California adobes and Spanish and Mexican land grants is now in process of publication, supplied this date after an exhaustive study of original source materials.

adorn the otherwise barren south wall.

In the days of the dons, a high stockade encircled the hacienda, and this, with the bullet-proof adobe walls, four feet in thickness, made the domicile of the Castros well-nigh impregnable against the attacks of savage Indians and wild animals - a precaution that was quite necessary at the time Don Francisco Castro settled on the huge tract of land that he called "Rancho San Pablo."

The earliest record we find of this vicinity is in the diary of Fr. Crespi, the narrator of the first expedition to explore the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. In 1772, he records that they camped in the vicinity of Cerrito Creek, where they killed a fat bear and enjoyed a supply of fresh meat.[3]

Next came the Spanish soldiers and settlers. Before California was ceded to the United States in 1848, it was easy for any citizen of good character to obtain, for a small sum, a grant of land from the Spanish or Mexican governments. These grants comprised tracts of land varying from one to eleven square leagues, and were handed out with a lavish hand. Among the grantees receiving the largest grants in Contra Costa were Ignacio Martinez and Francisco Castro.

Francisco Maria Castro was born in 1775, in the

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3. History of Contra Costa County, 115.
4. Frederick J. Hulaniski, History of Contra Costa County, 10-15.

province of Sonora, Mexico. After spending several years there as a soldier, he came to San Francisco at the close of the eighteenth century, and in 1800 was elected an alcalde of that city. In 1822, he was a member of the diputacion at San Jose, and the following year he was chosen diputado of the exploring expedition led by Padre Jose Altimira, north of San Francisco Bay.[5]

On April 15, 1823, Francisco Castro petitioned the government of Alta California for a land grant. He stated that he was the owner of large herds of cattle and horses, and that in order to preserve the cattle which he then possessed and those which he hoped to possess in the future, and in order to provide for his numerous family, he found it necessary to solicit of the authorities some three square leagues of land in the place called "Los Cochigunes," or "San Pablo." The Assembly granted him his petition immediately. The decree read as follows:

Monterey, April 15, 1823.

> The Honorable Assembly grants to the claimant the piece of land which he solicits, measuring three square leagues, considering the said claimant entitled to said favor for his services, his known probity, and the abundance of stock which he possesses, for which

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5. Mildred B. Hoover, Historic Spots of California; Counties of the Coast Range, 78-82.

> purpose the government appoints the commander of the Presidio of San Francisco for the measurement and giving him possession of the land for which he petitions.

The decree was signed by Governor Arguello, and countersigned by Jose Joaquin de la Torre, his secretary.[6]

This original grant of land, consisting of nearer four than three square leagues, was bordered on the west and on the north by the waters of San Francisco and San Pablo bays, on the south by the Rancho San Antonio, and on the east by the distant Contra Costa hills. There were no roads on this estate, and no fences were built. Miles of crooked trails, made by wild beasts and later trodden by cattle, twisted through the tangle of wild oats and salt grass.

Into this wilderness Don Francisco Castro drove his herds of cattle, which soon grew into many roving bands of half-wild animals that roamed at will, and furnished meat for the rancho, as well as leather and tallow for the traders.[7]

Already the father of a large family, Don Francisco lost no time building a house - the large south wing already described. He built it well. To him, it was to be home, storehouse, trading post, and fortress.

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6. History of Contra Costa County, 115.
7. Hoover, Historic Spots of California; Counties of the Coast Range, 78-82.

Three years passed; Don Francisco prospered. His herds grew, and so did his family. However, other people coveted parts of the fertile Castro Rancho, and questioned Don Francisco's title. Apparently Don Castro was worried about it also, for on January 1, 1827, he sent a petition to the governor of the territory saying that for some reasons, unknown to him, he had never been given judicial possession of the grant. He requested that an order of enforcement be issued at once. Apparently the government was careless about such matters, for on July 27 of the same year Don Francisco repeated his request. In this petition, he set forth the facts that he had built a house with stone foundations and two others of wood, and had planted a garden with many fruit trees and a vineyard of more than a thousand vines. He also stated that he had erected a mill for making flour, that he had many acres planted in wheat, and that he owned six hundred head of cattle, and five hundred horses.

Again his petition bore no fruit, but Don Castro was not one to let a matter rest. On January 30, 1828, he once more asked the governor to issue a writ of confirmation of his grant. Again it was ignored.[8] It is not clear just why Don Francisco was so anxious to have his title confirmed,

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8. History of Contra Costa County, 115.

nor is it known why the governor chose to ignore his request. At any rate, no one successfully contested Castro's title to the property, and he continued to farm and prosper. Instead of using his estate solely for the pasturing of wild cattle, as many of his contemporaries did, he raised large numbers of horses and oxen that could be employed in transforming the stubborn sod into agricultural land.[9]

On May 10, 1830, Don Francisco presented his fifth and last petition to the Mexican Governor of California, in which he stated that he was fifty-five years of age; that he was married and the father of ten children. He also said that he was a native of Mexico,[10] that he was, for thirteen years, a soldier and corporal in the Mexican Artillery; and that he had, at date of writing, some fourteen hundred head of cattle, six hundred sheep, and five hundred horses. The governor answered by requesting a map of the property, but before it could be made, Don Francisco died, November 5, 1831.[11]

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9. Rose H. Avina, Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in California, 69.
10. Auguste Duhaut-Cilly, "Duhaut-Cilly's account of California in the years 1827-1828," edited by Charles Franklin Carter, California Historical Society Quarterly, VIII (June, 1929) 243, says that he became acquainted with Francisco Castro in 1828. He describes Castro as being of French descent and says he was then 60 years of age. Obviously, the latter is an error, as Francisco died in 1831, aged 56. Bancroft, History of California, II, 750, says there is no evidence supporting Duhaut-Cilly's claim of Castro's French ancestry.
11. History of Contra Costa County, 115.

The widow and her seven sons and four daughters continued to live at the hacienda. Some of the children were married and had children of their own.

On May 26, 1834, Joaquin Ysidro Castro, son of Francisco and executor of his father's will, presented a petition to the governor in which he stated that as heir to part of the estate, and as guardian of his brothers and sisters, he solicited legal ownership of the Rancho San Pablo. Jose Figueroa, who was then governor, promptly issued a decree, and ordered the land surveyed.

On June 23, a year later, Joaquin sent another petition, this time to augment the previous one, saying that through an oversight, he had neglected to ask for all the land included in the map that accompanied his first request. This plea was also granted, and on August 20, 1835, a grant was issued by Figueroa for the entire property, some four square leagues (19,394 acres). Five years later, it was presented to the departmental assembly and was approved by that body on May 30, 1840.

There was a decided shortage of labor in California at that time, and the Castro brothers had to depend largely on the native Indians for ranch hands. The Indians, however, much preferred their own carefree, if somewhat squalid, mode of life to the hard work on the rancho, and much difficulty was encountered in inducing them to work.

Belonging to the Costanoan groups, swarthy, short in stature, with flat features and long straight unkempt hair, they presented a different picture from that of the traditional noble red men.[12] They went about half naked, the men with only a loincloth, while the women wore an apron of fur, or tules, depending on the season. Their summer habitations were nothing but rudely constructed shelters of interwoven boughs, and in winter, they lived in wigwams of poles and skins, built over dugouts; whole families occupied each wigwam.

Dr. Marsh, writing to Lewis Cass in 1846 said in reference to these natives:[13]

> They are a hairy race, and some of them have beards that would do honor to a Turk. In some individuals, the hair grows down to the eyebrows, so they may be said to have no forehead at all. Some few have that peculiar conformation of the eyes so remarkable in the Chinese - entirely different from the American Indian. . . . Yet, with this unpromising set of features, some of them have animated and agreeable countenances.

Even though the Indians were averse to farm labor, the Castro boys found a way to solve the problem. Desperate conditions called for desperate remedies. In 1836, Joaquin,

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12. A. L. Kroeber, Handbook of the Indians of California, 462-473. On page 886, Mr. Kroeber says the Costanoans belonged to the family group of the Penutians.
13. History of Contra Costa County, 95; Duhaut-Cilly, "Duhaut-Cilly's Account of California in the Years 1827-1828," California Historical Society Quarterly, VIII (June 1929), 242.

Antonio, and Victor Castro journeyed to the region of Santa Rosa, ostensibly to trade with the Indians, but it soon developed that besides trading with the natives, they were kidnapping braves and by one method or another, forcing them to work on their rancho - without pay. The Indians enjoyed very few legal rights under the Mexican regime in California, and probably nothing would have come of the abductions if the Castros had confined their activities to the men, but in their zeal, they took a number of children from their parents by force, thinking to train them as slaves.

The Indians, however, complained to General Vallejo, who was military <u>comandante</u> at that time, and he ordered the arrest of the three Castros. They were caught red-handed with a little Indian girl in their possession. Vallejo imprisoned the brothers and later sent them to Monterey, where they served short terms in the military prison. His prompt action earned him the good will of several tribes of Indians, but it also earned him the enmity of the Castro family.[14]

In 1838, they were involved in another Indian episode, partly to be revenged on Vallejo by undermining his influence with the Indians, and partly for their own gain. Knowing the Indians' weakness for liquor, they caused Chief

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14. George Tays, "Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and Sonoma," <u>California Historical Society Quarterly</u>, XVI (June 1937), 246.

Solano and several minor chiefs of the tribe to become drunk, and obtained their consent to the abduction of a number of Indian children. More than thirty children were stolen within a week and taken to San Pablo. Solano was arrested by General Vallejo and confessed his part in the plot. War was again narrowly averted between the Spaniards and the irate Indians, and the Castros were once more punished by General Vallejo.[15]

Another adobe house was built on the Rancho San Pablo at the other extreme boundary of the grant in 1838. It stands today in what is now the town of San Pablo. This house was built by Joaquin Ysidro, but in 1849 it became the home of his sister, Martina, who had married Governor Alvarado some ten years before. Governor Alvarado lived in this adobe until his death in 1882.[16]

Victor Castro, although one of the younger brothers (he was born in 1817), gradually assumed the management of the rancho. He built and operated the only ferryboats to operate in Mexican days between Sausalito, San Francisco, and El Cerrito, and he supplied fresh vegetables and meat to all whaling boats and tramp schooners that called at Cerrito.

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15. Alice May Cleaveland, North Bay Shore during the Spanish and Mexican Regimes, 140.
16. Garrison, Romance and History of California Ranchos, 46.

The Rancho San Pablo in 1840 began to be augmented by other grants. In October of that year Victor received a grant from Governor Alvarado for the tract called "Isla de la Yegua" (Mare Island),[17] which comprised 5,527.22 acres. In May of the next year, his brother, Juan Jose, received a grant called the "El Sobrante," rancho, consisting of more than 20,000 acres. In later years, this grant was to cause a great deal of squabbling among the Castro heirs.[18]

Victor used his Mare Island grant chiefly as a pasture for his stock, and a few years later was glad to sell it for $7,000. In 1852, the property was sold to the United States Government for $83,000, and today, if the land were for sale, it would be valued at $63,000 an acre![19]

Yerba Buena Island was also granted to one of the Castro family by Governor Alvarado. According to Bancroft, this grant was made on November 8, 1838, to Juan Jose Castro.[20] The object of the grant was ostensibly to establish habitation on the rocky island and thus prevent its being

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17. Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, Spanish and Indian Place Names of California, 207, says that when the ferryboat running between Benicia and Martinez capsized, General Vallejo's favorite white mare was forced to swim to this island. The General spent several days rescuing her, and the island became "Isla de la Yegua" or Mare Island.
18. Avina, Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in California, 85, 87.
19. "'Isla de la Yegua',-Mare Island," Grizzly Bear, LVII: whole No. 337, (May 1935), 10.
20. Bancroft, History of California, II, 753.

used as a base for smugglers. The island, however, was never inhabited by the Castros. A number of goats and pigs were put there in charge of a few vaqueros, who did little to prevent smuggling.

In 1847, the island was sold to Nathan Spear, and in 1855, when a decree of confirmation by the United States Government was sought, no evidence of the Castro grant could be found. There was no lack of verbal testimony, however, and on May 22, 1855, a decree of confirmation was issued. But the decision was appealed, and in the ensuing trial, it came to light that the original grant had never been properly filed and authenticated. The claim was rejected, and the subsequent owners were put off the island. From that time on the island was considered to be the property of the United States Government.[21]

Victor Castro married Dona Luisa Martinez, daughter of Ignacio Martinez and was the father of several children before he was twenty-five years of age. While quite young, Dona Luisa died; Victor's second wife was Dona

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21. Marcia E. Boyes. Legend of Yerba Buena Island, 36-37. Historians disagree somewhat as to which of the Castros received the Yerba Buena Grant. Garrison, Romance and History of California Ranchos, 81, says that General Jose Castro's claim to the island was rejected. (General Castro was the grandson of Macario Castro of San Juan Bautista, and his relationship with the El Cerrito Castros was very remote.) On pages 136-137, of same book, Garrison states that Francisco Castro won Yerba Buena Island on an $80 horse race bet, and that later it was presented to Victor.

Felicidad Carrillo. Later in life, he married an American woman.[22] In 1841, he was appointed Juez de Campo (Judge of the Plains).[23] He was reputed to be a brave and honest man and well thought of in the community.

In 1850, he built a number of additions to the hacienda[24] - a center wing measuring twenty-five by sixty feet was built transversely with the old south wing, and an extra story, with wide balconies in front and in the rear was added. This second story had a door and six windows opening toward the west.

Another wing, running east and west and measuring some thirty by sixty feet, was likewise added to the structure, forming the third side of the hollow square. Two doors, but no windows, graced the long side of this building, the windows opening, like those of the south wing, into the patio. This wing also housed a large ballroom where the many friends and relatives of the Castros, as well as celebrities from Monterey and Martinez, were wont to gather on fiesta days and dance to the music of guitars.[25]

With the cession of California to the United States, there was much confusion about land grants - everyone

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22. Bancroft, History of California, III, 755.
23. Ibid., IV, 685.
24. Hoover, Historic Spots in California; Counties of the Coast Range, 78-82.
25. Benjamin Rader, Interview with Mrs. Julia Galpin (Berkeley, California), daughter of Victor Castro.

scurrying to the Land Commission to have his grant confirmed by that office. In October, 1852, Joaquin Ysidro Castro, who was still administrator of his father's will, petitioned the Land Commission for confirmation of the 1840 land grant the Castros had received from Governor Figueroa.

He stated that his father was married to Gabriella Berryessa, and had died in 1831, leaving surviving him his wife and eleven children; and that the will left one undivided half to the widow, and the other half apportioned among the children. He also stated that, since the death of their father, Martina had 'intermarried' with Juan B. Alvarado, and that three other children, Maria Gregoria, Maria de Jesus, and Alvino had died without issue, and that their shares had gone to their mother, who was then the owner of fourteen-twenty-seconds of the estate. He added that on August 4, 1851, the mother, for love and affection, had deeded to said married daughter, Martina Castro Alvarado, all her interests in the property, which made Martina owner of fifteen-twenty-seconds of the total.

The United States Land Commission found the claim to be valid, and it was so adjudged on April 17, 1855. The final survey of the rancho, approved August 17, 1864, consisted of 17,938.58 acres, the amount of land originally granted to Francisco Castro in 1823. A patent was issued for the land on January 31, 1873.

But although the validity of the land grant was established in 1855, the battle among the heirs was just beginning. The less fortunate of the remaining children resented the fact that Martina had a fifteen-twenty-seconds share in the estate, while they held but one-twenty-second each. The matter was further complicated by the claims of the five children of Francisca, who had married Joaquin Moraga and died prior to 1852.

About the time of the appeal to the Land Commission, litigation began which was to last until nearly the end of the century and which was to keep the heirs in a state of poverty, with the estate getting smaller and smaller each year as one heir or another would sell his share. Pieces of the land were also sold to pay lawyers' fees.

In 1852, the disgruntled heirs succeeded in having Francisco Castro's original will set aside, but this action was rescinded in 1856 by a second appeal to the Supreme Court. Suit after suit was filed. Titles became so involved that no one knew exactly what he did own. At last it was agreed in 1856, to allow three disinterested parties to survey the land and make the partitions as they thought just. However, some members of the family refused to sign the agreement of partition; the interests of the minor heirs were not bound by said agreement, a fact which led to

suits - and more suits.

One of the sons, Juan Jose, lost his entire interest in the estate when he and his wife mortgaged it for $633 and were unable to redeem it. It was sold under foreclosure proceedings on January 12, 1857.

The final decree of partition was issued on March 3, 1894, but the once vast estate had dwindled to a few paltry acres. The total cost of the partitioning was reckoned at $103,470.73. The cost of filing and recording alone was $300.[26]

Doña Gabriella Berryessa Castro died in 1851, and her favored daughter, Martina Alvarado, in 1875. Other heirs died, or sold their holdings. Today, but four or five acres and the stately old El Cerrito Adobe are all that remain of the Castro heritage. Descendants of the original builders still own the building - one of the few adobes left in California to retain that distinction. Although the old house seems to hold itself aloof from the hurry and bustle of the busy thoroughfare near it, it is fast being hedged in by an ever-growing city. The lands of the Castros are now covered by miles of residences, paved highways, and streets, that buzz with the noise of business and pleasure.

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26. History of Contra Costa County, 115-121.

The towns of El Cerrito and San Pablo, and the city of Richmond have grown up like mushrooms around the old pioneer settlements, while the two old adobes, almost the only historic landmarks left by which to remember the glory that was the Castros, play new and somewhat strange roles in the new order of things.

The beginning of the town of El Cerrito, of which the Victor Castro adobe was the nucleus, was in 1888, when William Rust started a small blacksmith shop on San Pablo Avenue, for the site of which he paid Victor Castro an annual rental of five dollars. In 1909, a post office was established, and Mr. Rust was the postmaster. The place was called Rust until 1917, when it was incorporated as a city and given the name of El Cerrito, which means "Little Hill." At this time it had a population of fifteen hundred people.[27]

The old Alvarado Adobe at San Pablo is being used, ignominiously, as a storeroom for a grocery store, while its larger and more pretentious neighbor at El Cerrito now houses a modern night club called, appropriately enough, "Rancho San Pablo," where well-cooked meals are served and high-class entertainment may be enjoyed.

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27. History of Contra Costa County, 115-121.

The management of this club leases the property from the owner, Mrs. Julia Galpin, who is the daughter of Victor Castro. The house and grounds are as beautiful as they were in the days of the dons, and every attempt is made to preserve the Spanish and Mexican atmosphere of a century ago, in spite of a new building that was added to the hacienda about five years ago. This addition is an extension of the north wing, and being built in the shape of an "L," nearly closes the gap in the hollow square formed by the other three buildings.

A brick addition to the hacienda was destroyed in the earthquake of 1868, and some of the bricks were used to build a high wall which reaches from the east end of the south wing to a heavy iron gate that closes the path of brightly colored flagstones leading into the large patio with its immense playing fountain and aquarium.

Many relics of the Castro era may be seen inside the patio. The original millstones from Don Francisco's first grist mill repose against the side of one of the buildings, and here also are stacked a number of tiles that were used to roof the first building more than one hundred years ago. All the roofs originally were of tile, but for many years the old hacienda was unoccupied and curio hunters and other vandals stripped them nearly bare. Only a few tiles are left. These are rare museum pieces,

being hand made by Indian labor, and some of them are said to show the imprint of the hairs and veins of the Indians' thighs over which they were fashioned.

Now the roofs have other coverings. The south wing, which still contains evidence of the old chapel where the padres used to celebrate mass for the Castro family and their servants, is now covered by two thicknesses of heavy roofing paper, while the west and north wings, as well as the modern building, boast new roofs of shingles.

The outer walls of the west wing are covered with painted boards, and those of the south wing wear a heavy coating of plaster. The north wing, however, has but a thin coat of paint over the original adobe construction, and in places one may observe where curious visitors have hacked into the walls, enabling one to see the straws and wild grasses that were mixed with the adobe mud before it was fashioned into bricks and baked in the sun. On the west end of this building there is a very unique window, composed of more than one hundred small, thick, and opague panes that twinkle between heavy iron bars.

In the days of Victor Castro, the west wing was the living quarters, and consisted, as it does today, of seven rooms upstairs, and the same number below. From nearby San Pablo Avenue, there is little to distinguish it from a modern cottage.

In the back of the hacienda, at the end of a huge graveled parking lot, behind a row of fourteen tall eucalyptus trees, is a green-sodded cemetery where many of the Castros, including Don Victor and three of his sons, are buried. In this tiny corner, fifty feet square, there are no tombstones, no markers to honor the dead - only sunken graves and the remnants of charred stumps that mark the one-time border of trees that encircled the plot.[28]

Through an application by the State Chamber of Commerce and other public-spirited citizens, the Castro Adobe was registered as a State Landmark on October 9, 1939. Thousands of people, bent on business and pleasure, pass this historic old mansion daily, but few indeed are aware that it differs from the dozens of other restaurants and night clubs along the avenue. To those who know its story, however, a visit to the Rancho San Pablo brings a rich reward.

Here one may see the beauty of a nearly forgotten age and marvel at the stability and durability of structures built of dirt, and mostly by Indian labor, but which have endured for more than a century, through earthquakes, fires

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28. Information about present day conditions at Castro House was gathered on a field trip by the writer. Especial thanks are due to Mrs. Julia Galpin for many details of her family's history.

storms, and wars. And here one may rest, and dine within the walls that gave hospitable welcome to so many governors, generals, and potentates in the Golden Age of the dons.

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