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HACIENDA of GOVERNOR PIO PICO

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HACIENDA OF GOVERNOR PÍO PICO

Colorful characters abounded in early California, but few are better known or more interesting than the last Mexican governor, Pío Pico. His <u>hacienda</u>, or <u>Ranchito</u>, as he affectionately termed it, was the residence which Don Pío considered home. He was called away very often by his obligations to his country and by the demands which his many scattered properties made upon his attention. Nevertheless, the most truly pleasant and the most treasured in Don Pío's memory were the golden hours spent at his beloved <u>Ranchito</u>. Elsewhere he might be reviled, buffeted, pressed by the unrelenting cares of life. At the <u>Ranchito</u> he was at peace. He could there enjoy the art of living as found in the laughter of youth, the handclasp of a true friend, and the mellowing influence of his own family.

Pío Pico was born at Misión San Gabriel on May 5, 1801. He was the son of José María Pico, an army sergeant. It was a very unpretentious start, indeed, that young Pío had in life. He was one of ten children, and, when his father died, in 1819, he was left largely responsible for the care of his mother, sisters and brothers. Unlike many of the people who later became prominent, young Pío did not have any extensive patrimony of land and cat-

tle to fall back upon. He had to rely on his own native wit and resources.[1]

Very little formal education could be obtained in early California, and because of lack of finances, Pío could not even take full advantage of what there was. He was taught to read by an old lady, Doña Matilda Carrillo, the wife of Joaquín Arce who was stationed at San Diego. When young Pío was twelve years of age, he attended a school held in the Presidio of San Diego by Don José Antonio Carrillo, Pío's brother-in-law. About the full extent of his training under Don José was to fill pages full of the name "Señor Don Felix María Callejas".[2] Whatever might be said for or against that type of pedagogy, it had to suffice for teaching Pío to write. His religious instruction was not quite so scanty. He learned the catechism by heart from beginning to end. When asked by his mother, he would recite it - all of it - for the edification, and perhaps to the dismay, of his audience. Meanwhile his mother would nod her head and smile approvingly. Also, Padre Fernando Martinez of Misión San Diego taught Pío to assist at mass. Even so, Pío never learned any

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1. H. D. Barrows, "Pío Pico," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, III, iii, 55.
2. M. E. Smith, Pío Pico, ranchero and politician, 9-10.

Latin, or even the meaning of the words he so glibly rolled off his tongue.

Upon the death of his father, in 1819, Pío set up a shop at San Diego. There he contrived to make a living for his mother and family. Two years later, he was engaged by his brother-in-law, José Antonio Carrillo, to freight liquor. In this occupation, young Don Pío showed a business astuteness which goes far to explain the fortune which he was able to acquire. He set up a dram shop at San Jose in order to dispose of his spirituous wares. The current price for drinks was about two reales, or twenty-five cents. Don Pío, with a sudden burst of sympathy for temperance, decided that the amount of liquor in each tumbler was excessive. Consequently, he introduced the use of ox-horns, equipped with false wooden bottoms. The customers were delighted by having their drink served in what seemed to be much larger containers, while the thrifty Don Pío had the satisfaction of knowing that the ox-horns did not hold nearly as much as the original tumblers.[3] Don Pío must surely have relied upon the potency of his product to save him from detection!

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3. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, II, 604.

In many ways the youthful Don Pío showed an independence of spirit and a refusal to acquiesce to arbitrary authority. This quality of his helped to bring about the political importance he later enjoyed. In fact, rebel instincts seemed to be very closely allied to the Pico family, for even as early as 1810 his father was temporarily imprisoned for agitation in favor of Mexican independence.[4]

When Pío was a young man, he had occasion to ride up to Los Angeles on a visit. There the alcalde, Señor Ávila, who, as Don Pico expressed it, "ruled a fuerza de machete," (by power of the machete) ordered Don Pío to go to work on the new aqueduct. Pío, on horseback and armed with a musket, bid defiance to Ávila and spurred his horse for home.[5]

Some time later, in 1826, young Don Pío had an experience which instilled in him a new ideal, which he termed: "The sacred rights of a citizen." In this instance, Don Pío had been made secretary in a suit tried in military court against a certain Señor Luis Bringas. Bringas refused to answer the summons of the court. He insisted that a civil citizen was not answerable to the arbitrary decisions of the military. Pico was sent for the audacious objector.

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4. Barrows, Pío Pico, III, iii, 56.
5. Bancroft, California, II, 559.

However, the impressionable Pío, after sleeping over the problem, decided that the citizen was right. He refused to execute the orders of the Comandante General, Don José M. Estudillo of San Diego. As a consequence, Don Pío was thrown into jail. Next morning the Comandante, perhaps impressed by the young hot-head's determined stand, publicly set him at liberty.[6] Such action on the part of Señor Don Pío Pico greatly increased his popularity among his admiring, but more cautious, contemporaries.

Fortune greatly favored Don Pío. His political rise was rapid. He was an officer of the Diputación, or territory council, in 1828. He was a leader in the rebellion against Governor Victoria in 1831, and interim governor. Finally, after holding many other offices, he became temporary governor of California on February 22, 1845, and was confirmed in that office on April 18, 1846. However, what promised to be an outstanding public career ended with the United States invasion in 1846 to 1847. Financially, also, he was highly successful. Beside the Ranchito at the Paso de Bartolo, Don Pío acquired a large amount of property and considerable wealth in the hide and tallow industry.[7]

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6. Barrows, Pío Pico, III, iii, 57-58.
7. Bancroft, California, IV, 778-779.

It was at the Ranchito, rather than at some of his more extensive properties, that Pío Pico felt at home. He is said to have begun building an adobe there as early as 1826. However, it probably was not until several years later that he actually began work on the building called his Mansión.[8] In a few years after 1826, though, Don Pío had reason to expand and beautify his house as much as possible, for he was engaged to be married. It was, so far as records show, his only love affair. Don Pío stinted on nothing where his bride was concerned.

The wedding itself made history in California. In 1834, invitations announcing the nuptials of Señor Don Pío Pico and Señorita María Ignacia Alvarado were sent out to all the proud aristocracy and the retainers of the Picos and the Carrillos. The marriage celebrations took place at the Los Angeles home of Don Pío's brother-in-law, Don José Antonio Carrillo. It was the most prolonged and sumptuous affair of its kind that Spanish California ever witnessed. For an entire week the guests enjoyed entertainments of every description and richly spread banquets. At night, in the spacious ballrooms, the gay assemblage whirled

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8. H. E. Rensch, and E. G. Rensch, Historic spots in California, the southern counties, 66.

through the heady mazes of the dances under the romantic light of tallow dips.[9]

Don Pío wanted to share his happiness with the world! As for the bride, she was indeed worthy of the best that Don Pío could give her. Her sparkling beauty and fascinating manners charmed all who knew her - men and women alike. A Spanish California woman, years after Doña María's death, exclaimed:[10]

> You should have seen her! Words cannot express her looks, nor her charming way when she conversed with people. She smiled the most sweetly of all women.

Immediately after the festivities, the beaming young Pío carried off his bride to the large and beautiful mansión he had prepared for her at the Ranchito.

Thirty-three well appointed rooms formed Pío Pico and María's home. It was two stories high, with adobe walls and gabled roof. The rooms were fairly large for the time. One, the sala, was built expressly for dances and for other hospitable uses. There were even those unheard-of luxuries in a day of charcoal braziers, fireplaces! These, though somewhat small and smoky,

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9. J. M. Guinn, "Historic houses in Los Angeles," Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, III, iii, 65.
10. E. H. Adams, To and fro in Southern California, with sketches in Arizona and New Mexico, 207.

radiated an impressive amount of warmth and cheer. There were also wooden flooring and shutters, which were rare in the time of few sawmills. Enclosed was a spacious patio which contained a beautiful garden.[11] This was Don Pío's especial pride. On many an evening did some amorous swain steal into the patio, and, under the darkened window of some fair guest of the Pico's, run his fingers over the strings of his guitar and sing in a silvery tenor voice:[12]

> Fly not yet, 'tis just the hour
> When pleasure, like the midnight flower
> That scorns the eye of vulgar light
> Begins to bloom for sons of night
> And maids who love the moon.

Perhaps even Don Pío might have, in memory of their courtship days, crooned a similar tune under his lovely Doña María's reja.

Life at the Ranchito was very pleasant indeed. Under the guidance of the genial Don Pío and his attractive wife, Doña María, hospitality was lavished on everyone who came. The guests and servants all loyally acclaimed the smooth, peaceful, pleasant manner in which time passed at the home of Don Pío. Many picnics, fandangos, and other amusements, including such outdoor

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11. J. H. D. Francis, "The Pío Pico mansion, a relic of adobe days, " in California History Nugget, III, 15-17.
12. Ibid., 20.

sports as horse-racing, were engaged in at the Ranchito. One of Don Pío's horse-races, although not taking place at the Ranchito itself, became somewhat famous. Señor Pío Pico had a cow pony, called Sarco, which was recognized as the undefeated champion. Señor José Sepulveda, probably to uphold his family's prestige, imported a thoroughbred, named the Black Swan, all the way from Australia in order to challenge Don Pío's Sarco. Sportsmen came from as far as San Francisco and San Diego to witness the contest. The stakes were $25,000 in cash, 500 mares, 500 heifers, 500 calves and 500 sheep. There was no estimate of the private wagers. The race was run over a nine-mile course in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Excitement was at the bursting point when the word "go" was given. Sarco soon took the lead, and for more than six gruelling miles, held it. At the seven-mile post, however, the thoroughbred, Black Swan, got his second wind and began inching past Sarco. The last two miles were easily taken by Black Swan. The wagers were cheerfully paid. Another champion had fallen.[13]

Many other stories are told about the geniality and generosity of Señor Don Pío Pico. One time, during

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13. M. Morris, Los Angeles, 43.

his governorship, Don Pío and Doña María stood as godfather and godmother at a christening in Los Angeles. It was a brilliant occasion. All the important people of the city attended. The bells of the old adobe church rang while the procession made its slow way to the altar. After the ceremony the young lads of the city pressed forward shouting: "Bolo, Bolo, Señor Pedrino! Bolo, Señora Madrina! Bolo was a customary cry for the godfather to show his generosity. In this case, Don Pío had provided a bag of tooled leather, filled with gold pesetas worth about one dollar each, pierced and tied with sky-blue silk ribbon - the favorite color of Doña María. These then were scattered to the laughing, scrambling crowd.[14]

During Don Pío's term as governor, the Ranchito saw him but seldom. Most of his time was spent either at his adobe town house in High Street in Sonoratown, Los Angeles, or at the Bella Union hotel. The hotel was only a one-story building until, in 1858, another story was added.[15] During the short time in which Pico was in power, there was much promise of governmental reforms and improvements. Don Pío was an advocate of education, sound government finance,

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14. A. B. Packman, Leather dollars, 15-17.
15. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 25-26.

and even of more rights for women. The latter was probably due to the influence of Doña María. It was said that, with Pico's rise, the difference in women's station was such that even the gentlest wife would seize her husband by the beard on occasion.[16] Don Pío must have been extremely unpopular among his less happily married compatriots!

Unfortunately, Señor Don Pío Pico's term as governor was cut short by the United States invasion. He soon realized that resistance was impossible, and, consequently, cast about for the best course to follow under the circumstances. He determined to leave California and to dissolve the constituted authority. In this way whatever peace negotiations might later take place in Mexico would be the least embarrassed by any concessions forced upon the governor or the assembly. Upon the occasion when Don Pío made his decision known officially, he took leave of the assembly, after pointing out the situation and the reason for his decision, in the following manner:[17]

> My friends, farewell! I take leave of you. I abandon the country of my birth,

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16. Bancroft, Pastoral California, 305-306.
17. Bancroft, California, V, 275.

my family, my property, and whatever else is most grateful to man, all to save the national honor. But I go with the sweet satisfaction that you will not second the deceitful views of the astute enemy; that your loyalty and firmness will prove an inexpugnable barrier to the machinations of the invader. In any event, guard your honor, and observe that the eyes of the entire universe are fixed upon you.

The Ranchito was vacant. Its owner had left in self-imposed exile. An invading army was in the land, and the fate of the Ranchito was in the laps of the gods of chance. The high-water mark of the Californians' defense passed with the battle of the Dominguez Rancho. The forces of the United States re-formed at San Diego and began their last march on the city of Los Angeles. Paso de Bartolo, of which the Ranchito was a part, was directly in the path of Stockton's troops.

On December 29, 1846, Stockton left San Diego. He had about 600 men, of whom only Gillespie's volunteers were mounted. The troops as a whole were badly clothed, some of their shoes being made out of canvas. It was very cold and the roads were over quite difficult country. The horses were in such poor condition that it was necessary to help them over the particularly steep or sandy places, yet the spirits of the men were high.[18] It was quite

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18. R. F. Stockton, "Commodore Stockton's report," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, X, ii, 117-118.

otherwise on the part of the Californians. While it was true that they were excellently mounted, they had only inferior, locally manufactured powder, and no heart for what seemed obviously to be a hopeless task - that of repulsing the better armed amd more numerous forces of the United States.

Upon receipt of the news that Stockton was advancing towards Los Angeles, Flores, who was in command of the Californians, quickly moved from his location in the San Fernando Valley and advanced to the San Gabriel River. It was at first hoped that Stockton would attempt to cross at the lower, and somewhat easier, ford of La Jabonería. Flores hoped to make use of the willows and wild mustard at La Jabonería to shield his men and to place Stockton's foot-soldiers at a great disadvantage. Not only did Flores intend to use the willows as an ambush, but he also intended to fire the mustard, and charge under cover of the smoke. Stockton, however, heard of the plans, and decided to cross higher up the river at the Paso de Bartolo. This ford was only a short distance from Don Pío's deserted mansión.[19]

On the morning of January 8, the two small forces

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19. Bancroft, California, V, 385-390.

faced each other across the San Gabriel River. Flores had about 500 horsemen, and had them carefully placed to take advantage of whatever help could be obtained from the terrain. Stockton drew his men up into hollow squares, and attempted a charge through the stream. The Californians showered them with lead, and stampeded a herd of wild mares against the oncoming United States troops. Then Flores ordered a countercharge, which might reasonably have been successful. This, however, was only half-heartedly carried out, and an order by a subordinate officer to halt further complicated the situation. As a consequence, Stockton's men were able to repulse the Californians with little difficulty. After the powder supply of the Californians had become depleted, Stockton successfully forced his way across the river, up the four-foot embankment, and onto the level ground on the other side.[20] The United States forces opened fire with their artillery. The Californians were forced from their positions, and one of their guns was dismantled. After a little more fighting, the Californians withdrew and Stockton's men returned to camp on the river bank. The United States had lost two

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20. H. V. Shubert, California's defense against United States military occupation, 174-180.

men killed and nine wounded, and the Californians had lost about the same number; however, there is no exact information about their casualties.

At midnight, there was some firing which disturbed Stockton's camp forawhile but it did not lead to anything serious. When daylight came, a party was dispatched to search a rancho about three-fourths of a mile from camp. This was, in all probability, the Ranchito. When nothing of value to other invaders was found, or any enemies discovered lurking there, the Ranchito was left in peace. About nine o'clock in the morning, the United States forces broke camp and filed away, slowly and painfully, towards Los Angeles.[21] In a short time the dust raised by the troops settled. The midday hush took the place of the noise of battle and the raucous shouts of men. The mansión settled back into its sleep, awaiting the return of the Picos.

When the war was over, and life began once more to flow through its usual channels, Señor Don Pío Pico returned, in 1848, to California. His sacrifice had been unavailing, but the catastrophe had not been nearly so great as he had anticipated. Few of his friends were

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21. Stockton, Report, X, ii, 120-121.

gone, his property remained, and the Ranchito still beckoned. For some years, Don Pío and Doña María continued to enjoy life together at the mansión. They lavished, if possible, more hospitality than ever on their friends and guests. Many a fandango and many a day of banquets, games, and sports were arranged by Don Pío. One thing alone was denied him and his beloved Doña María. They had no children, and had to content themselves with an adopted daughter. Don Pío, even though he gave up political affairs, continued to increase in goods. In 1851, he was assessed for 22,000 acres and $21,000 worth of personal property. At one time he owned the Santa Margarita rancho, the Las Flores rancho, and the Ranchito, besides his town property and flocks and herds.

In 1860, a shadow fell over the life of genial Don Pío. In that year Doña María died. It happened in a way which particularly affected Don Pío because of its suddenness. In the early days of California, it was the custom of women to smoke cigarettes as freely as did the men. Señor Pico himself was an incessant smoker. One day Doña María and Don Pío were enjoying cigarettes together when Doña María fell suddenly and violently ill. Within an hour she was dead. Don Pío was numbed with grief, and because of the sad recollections connected with it, he never smoked again. Don Pío never remar-

ried, but remained true to the memory of Doña María.[22]

Pío Pico, as the new society and new customs began to form around him, did not find everything always running smoothly at the Ranchito. By 1865, he began to have trouble with his new neighbors over water rights on the San Gabriel River. The surrounding ranchers held a meeting, on April 30 of that year, and decided that Don Pío was getting more than his share of the flow in the San Gabriel. They determined to break the dam. Pico and his adherents threatened to rebuild it. Not until soldiers were dispatched to the spot was order secured and the whole case properly adjudicated.[23]

On August 5, 1881, Don Pío received his final land patent from the United States for his Ranchito. At that time it was officially recognized as being 8,891 acres in extent. Alas, Pico did not have much longer to enjoy his property. One of the traits which made him the most attractive - his unbounded generosity - proved to be his undoing. Seldom, if ever, would he refuse to act as co-signer to a note, nor would he refuse a loan when asked. Consequently, Don Pico continually found himself in fi--

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22. Adams, To and fro, 207-208.
23. Wilmington Journal, May 6, 1865.

nancial difficulties. These he met by borrowing from local money-lenders at ruinous rates of as high as fifty per cent on short time loans. Such loose business methods, while quite customary and reasonably safe in the more honest early California days, were fatal when the sharper practices of some unscrupulous men appeared with the new régime. The final blow came when Don Pío Pico had to borrow $62,000 from Charles Prager, B. Cohen, and W. J. Broderick. As security he, without fully comprehending what was being required of him, gave a blanket mortgage for all of his property, even for the Ranchito. When the debt fell due, Don Pío was unable to meet the obligation. He lost his properties and was left practically penniless.[24]

Even in misfortune, Don Pío, though quite an old man, continued to be a striking figure. Though not particularly handsome in features, he had a commanding physique and a charming personality. Also he had a weakness for decoration. He used to wear massive jewelry and all his Mexican medals. When his fortune had gone, Don Pío had to part with his expensive ornaments. One thing he never lost, however, and that was the air of a gentleman. When he was eighty-three years of age he was described as fol-

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24. Barrows, Pío Pico, III, iii, 64-65.

lows:[25]

> Don Pío, 'the last of the Picos,' is a person who, once seen, could not well be forgotten. He is of medium height, stoutly built, with straight shoulders full face, dark eyes, snowy hair, and brown skin. He is social, charitable, polished in manners. The gifts and graces win him high regard of all acquaintances, and the admiration of his kindred. He is one of the few representatives remaining of the Mexican regime in California.

During Don Pío's last years, he lived for the most part with his relatives and friends. He divided his time between the Warner ranch and the home of his sister and her husband, Don Juan Forster, on the Margarita Rancho. Jonathan Warner was one of Pío Pico's warmest friends and admirers. Time must have seemed heavy on the hands of Don Pío. Sickness gave him a great deal of discomfort. Of his many possessions, his many friends, and most of all his beloved Doña María, only memories remained. New faces, new customs, in fact a new world, had grown up around him. Don Pío had lived too long. He must have felt very few regrets when on September 11, 1894, death took him away at the age of minety-three.[26]

The mansión, alone, deserted, and falling into ruin, remained. In 1866, almost half of the old adobe

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25. Adams, To and fro, 209.
26. Newmark, Southern California, 608.

was swept away in a flood from the San Gabriel River. The seventeen rooms remaining were standing when, in 1906, the women of the town of Whittier began to take an interest in the old building. A Governor Pico Museum and Historical Society and a Landmarks Club were formed. The house was leased from the city of Whittier, to which ownership of the old adobe had reverted. Many needed repairs were made. On April 14, 1914, the city deeded to the State one-third of an acre of land upon which the residence of Don Pío stood. The State made additional repairs, and at present (1936) the landmark is administered as a monument by the State Division of Parks.[27]

Adobe days are past. But it is indeed fitting that the house of the Ranchito - the home of the genial Don Pío, last of the Mexican governors, and his gracious Doña María has been preserved. Even today, as in the time of Don Pío Pico, peace can be found in the venerable adobe mansión. A stroll through the garden, which Pico loved so well, and one feels again the atmosphere of the early California days - a time of laughter and carefree hours among a people who knew how to live.

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27. Francis, Pío Pico Mansión, 20.

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HACIENDA DE GOVERNOR PÍO PICO
(Summary by John Samuel Fox)

There are few more colorful or more interesting characters in California's history than Pío Pico, last Mexican governor. His hacienda, or Ranchito, as he affectionately termed it, was one of the province's gayest social centers and the residence which he considered home. Although frequently called away to supervise his other properties or to attend to his official duties, Don Pío's happiest hours were those spent at his beloved Ranchito.

Son of an army sergeant, Pío Pico was born at Misión San Gabriel on May 5, 1801. He was one of ten children, and, when his father died, in 1819, he was left largely responsible for the care of his mother, sisters, and brothers. From these humble beginnings, his native wit and resources won for him an important place in the life of California. He had very little formal education. Don Pío opened a dram shop which laid the foundation for his fortune. He acquired a large amount of property and considerable wealth in the hide and tallow industry.

As a young man, Pío Pico interested himself in politics. He was an officer of the Diputación, or territorial

council, in 1828. Three years later he was one of the leaders in the rebellion against Governor Victoria, and became governor ad interim. Finally, after holding many other offices, he became temporary governor early in 1845, and in April of the following year was confirmed in that office.

Don Pío early acquired the property where his Ranchito was built. It is said that he began building an adobe there as early as 1826, but it was not until some years later that he actually began work on the building called his mansion. He was then engaged to the beautiful Señorita María Ignacia Alvarado, and the generous Pío Pico wished to take his bride to a setting worthy of her charm and grace. The wedding was celebrated at the Carrillo home in Los Angeles in 1834. The most prolonged and sumptuous affair which Spanish California ever witnessed, that celebration, with its entertainments, banquets and dances, lasted an entire week.

The mansion to which Don Pío took his beloved bride contained thirty-three well appointed rooms. It was two stories high, with adobe walls and gabled roof. The rooms were fairly large, and one, the sala, was built expressly for dances and other hospitable purposes. Fireplaces, unheard-of luxuries in a day of charcoal braziers, radiated warmth and cheer. There were also wooden flooring and shutters, which were uncommon in that time of few sawmills. Enclosed was a spacious patio which contained a beautiful garden.

Under the genial guidance of Don Pío and Doña María, life at the Ranchito was very pleasant indeed. Everyone who cared to come was welcome to enjoy their lavish hospitality. Picnics, fandangos, banquets, horse races - all combined to make the Pico hacienda one of the gayest and happiest in Alta California.

When Pío Pico was governor, however, he could spend little time at the hacienda. His term was cut short by the United States invasion of 1846-1847 and, rather than embarrass peace negotiations, he chose to exile himself. He returned to his home in 1848, and for years he and Doña María were open-hearted hosts. In 1860, she died suddenly. The mansion thereafter had no mistress, for Don Pío never remarried. Six years later misfortune again visited the Ranchito, when almost half of the old adobe was swept away in a flood from the San Gabriel River.

The final blow came in the eighties. Don Pío had been very generous in acting as co-signer for friends' notes, in loaning money freely, and in lavish entertainment. He went deeply into debt and had to give up his properties. Practically penniless, he lived with relatives and friends until his death on September 11, 1894, a polished old gentleman of commanding physique and charming personality.

The old adobe was for a time in the possession of

the town of Whittier. In 1906, the women of Whittier began to take an interest in the historic building. The hacienda was leased and many needed repairs were made, after a Governor Pico Museum and Historical Society and a Landmarks Club were formed. In 1914, the building passed into the hands of the State and has since been administered as a monument by the State Division of Parks.