

CASA de ESTUDILLO

(Summary by Esther Harlan)

Three generations of an important Spanish Californian family made their home in Casa de Estudillo. The place is rich in historical background, and is often pointed out erroneously, as Ramona's Marriage Place.

Don José María Estudillo, who came to the New World from Spain in 1787, was the founder of the Estudillo family in California. The son of an army officer, he served in Lower California from 1796 to 1806. Promoted to lieutenantcy, he was stationed for twenty years at Monterey and in 1827 was made captain of the Presidio of San Diego, where he died three years later.

Of his several sons, Don Jose Antonio and Don Jose Joaquin had the more notable careers, the latter settling in the San Francisco bay region. It was Don Jose Antonio who built Casa de Estudillo in San Diego for his bride, Doña María Victoria Domínguez, whom he married in 1825. He held a number of responsible official positions during the Mexican occupation and under American administration. While he was treasurer and assistant collector of revenue (1828-1830) he and his sister were granted the Otay rancho. In 1833, he was elected one of the seven members of the diputación, the provincial legislature, and was the third alcalde of pueblo

San Diego after its incorporation in 1835.

During the struggle between northern and southern political factions, Don Antonio organized the San Diego detachments which took part in it. When the northern forces were victorious in 1838, however, and General Castro arrested several of the southern leaders, Don Antonio contrived to escape by hiding in a loft. He remained neutral during occupation by United States troops and later was made town treasurer and county assessor under the new administration.

Before his death in 1852, Don Antonio had acquired a large amount of property, including a silver mine in Mexico and a number of land grants in different parts of California, thus laying the foundation of the Estudillo family fortune. Three generations of the family lived in the house Don Antonio had built. Though its exterior was not particularly attractive - a whitewashed rectangle with small barred windows and but few doorways in the thick adobe wall - comfort and even luxury marked its interior. Built around a spacious patio - 150 feet by 75 feet - there were twelve rooms and a chapel. Most of its furniture was of mahogany and rosewood from Honduras and Chiapas forests, brought out as ballast by Yankee hide ships and fashioned into massive chairs, beds, tables, by mission Indians. There was a fountain in the patio, and the flower garden and surrounding shrubbery were notable.

With the real estate boom of the '60s and '70s, this old house - as was all the Old Town - was overshadowed by New San Diego, though it continued to be the home of one or another of Don Antonio's sons until 1887. The caretaker then left in charge allowed sightseers (for a consideration) to take away souvenirs - a piece of silver plate fashioned from ore brought from the Mexican mine, quaint door keys of hand-wrought iron - anything they fancied. The whole place was gradually dismantled.

In 1910, John D. Spreckels donated generously toward restoration of the house, the work being supervised by Mrs. Hazel W. Waterman. The casa is now a museum.

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CASA de ESTUDILLO

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LA CASA DE ESTUDILLO
(Ramona's Marriage Place)

Houses seem, oftentimes, not only to indicate the state of the owner's material wealth, but to take on aspects of his character. They seem also to reflect past glories or misfortunes which their inhabitants experienced. La Casa of the San Diego branch of the Estudillo family has that quality. It has the serene appearance of a patriarch who has drunk his cup of life to the dregs and is savoring the draught in dreams of long ago.

The founder of the Estudillo family in California was Jose Maria Estudillo. Born in Spain in 1772, he came to the New World in 1787. Being the son of an officer, it was natural that he should take up arms as a profession. He served as soldado distinguido and cadet in Lower California from 1796 to 1806. Promoted to the rank of lieutenant, he was sent to Monterey where he remained for twenty years. In 1827, he was made captain of the Presidio of San Diego, where he died three years later. Although his career was of some importance, his greatest honor lay in the fact that he was the founder of "one of the best of the old families as judged by the average prominence and character of its members".¹

1. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, II, 794.

Although there were several sons of Jose Maria, two were of especial prominence, Don Jose Antonio and Don Jose Joaquin. Both had eminent careers, but at opposite ends of Alta California. Don Joaquin settled on San Francisco Bay after his service in the northern presidio while Don Antonio kept his residence in San Diego. It was Don Antonio who built La casa de Estudillo.

The presidio at San Diego had comprised the entire settlement there from its founding in 1769 until after the turn of the century. All habitations had been inside the presidio walls. After 1800, however, quarters were crowded so that some families began to live in huts outside, probably near the little garden plots which the soldiers maintained. There had been two reasons for not building there before: San Diego was a fort, not a pueblo; and there was the ever-present fear of Indian attacks. A list dated 1821 showed that at least five small houses had been constructed near or around the place which was later the town plaza.²

Decay of the presidio and increase of commercial prosperity hastened building operations to such an extent that by the time another decade had passed a respectable

2. W. E. Smythe, History of San Diego, 1542-1907, 131-132.

beginning had been made on the town. The visitor Duhaut-Cilly wrote in 1827, when he made port, that "below the presidio on a dandy plain, are scattered thirty to forty houses of poor appearance, and some badly cultivated gardens."³ Even though the French sea captain was not very much impressed by the young settlement, several of the dwellings might almost have been called edifices. Among the largest was the house erected by Don Antonio for his bride Dona Maria Victoria Dominguez, whom he married in 1825.

Don Jose Antonio Estudillo has been pictured as a man of excellent character. It is certain that in his later years he had a great many friends and exerted a wide sphere of influence throughout the southern part of Alta California. His career as a public official was long and honorable. He held official positions, not only during Mexican occupation, but also under American administration.

The education he received as a youth was very good for the time and country. His public career began when he was twenty-two years of age. He was listed as a candidate for treasurer in 1827, when Governor Echeandia was trying to depose the comisario sent by the Mexican government. However, Don Antonio refused, as did the two other candidates,

3. A. Duhaut-Cilly, "Duhaut-Cilly's account of California in the years 1827-1828", in California Historical Society Quarterly, VIII, 3:215.

to serve. In 1828 he was appointed to the post and that time he accepted it. At the same time he was assistant collector of revenue under Don Juan Bandini. He filled both positions until 1830. It was during his term of office that he and his sister were granted the Otay rancho.

In 1833, he was elected as one of the seven members of the diputacion, the provincial assembly. Two years later he was second on the list of seniority when the governor was forced to turn his office over to the senior member because of ill health. Since Carrillo, the senior vocal, was absent in Mexico, the choice would ordinarily have fallen to Don Antonio. However, the latter had been excused from the current session because of sickness, so the office was given to Senor Castro, the third vocal in rank. Don Antonio's illness was cured extraordinarily fast, while he and his friends protested the choice of Castro. There was some unpleasant feeling between north and south because of this occurrence, but nothing serious resulted.⁴

Don Antonio was the third alcalde of the pueblo of San Diego after it was formed in 1835. He served in his duly elected capacity for a year. When the government decided that the pueblo was too small to have an alcalde, he was appointed juez de paz in 1838. Those years also marked

4. Bancroft, California, III, 299-300, 414-415.

the period of struggles between the southern part of the province and the northern. Estudillo supported Don Carlos Carrillo, the "pretender" of the south, against Governor Alvarado. There is little indication that Estudillo took part in any of the skirmishes; he was probably busy with municipal affairs. He did, however, organize the San Diego detachments that were sent. In 1838, when the northern party was victorious and General Castro arrested several of the southern leaders in San Diego, Don Antonio escaped by hiding in a loft. There was a proposed rescue party, which he led, to free the prisoners at San Luis Rey. The evidence is somewhat conflicting because, while he evidently went near the place, no rescue was effected. Some accounts say that the prisoners decided against the project; others declare that all preparations were made but that Estudillo failed to appear.⁵ The scarcity of evidence at hand prevents any conclusion as to the correctness of either story.

Don Antonio continued serving his city and county until his death in 1852. But enough has been given to indicate the high lights of his career. During the occupation of California by the United States, he remained neutral throughout the controversy. The last official posts which

5. Bancroft, California, III, 491, 548-549, 557, 568, 579.

which he held were under the new administration when he was town treasurer and county assessor.

All during these years, he had been acquiring land. By the time of his death, he had laid the foundation for the Estudillo family fortune. He owned property in San Diego; his grant of Otay has already been mentioned; Temecula was given him; property at San Juan Capistrano was acquired in 1841; in 1842, he was the grantee of San Jacinto.

While Don Antonio's public life was interesting and of value to his country, his private life was no less honorable. Since it revolved around his casa, an understanding of it throws light on the man himself. There he brought his bride. There he laid his mother and father to rest. His numerous children were born and brought up in its environs. There he went for comfort and repose when life outside became too trying.

The Estudillo house was built in a manner worthy of its owner. Constructed around a patio which it inclosed on three sides, the building faced north on the plaza. It contained some twelve rooms and a chapel with walls of adobe two to four feet thick. The outside presented a rather

6. R. Newcomb, The old mission churches and historic houses of California, their history, architecture, art and lore, 513.

blank appearance; it was a walled square pierced by few doorways, small windows and one large double gate in the patio wall. Whitewash made it stand out from its surroundings. A veranda of wood ran along the north side, the part which fronted the plaza. On the northeast corner of the house was a square tower of two decks. The first or lower balcony rested directly on the columns of the veranda while the upper deck was attached to the roof of the house. Access was gained by a stairway which led from the veranda through the first to the second platform. Over all was a tiled, octagonal roof. It was to this cupola that the young people of the town would gather with their guitars and viols. It was also a favorite point of vantage for spectators when special events occurred in the plaza. From there were watched the bullfights, bear-baitings and parades which took place on festive occasions.⁷

Tradition declares that the beams for the house were cut in the Cuyamaca mountains, then were lifted to the shoulders of Indian porters who carried them forty miles to the place where they were to be used. Projecting through the walls the rough ends cast interesting shadows on the white walls. Covering these timbers and forming the "shed"

7. E. H. Clough, Ramona's marriage place.

type roof were red tiles. Rawhide was used to bind the beams together, for there were no nails to be had. The roof sloped toward the outside on all three fachadas, and presented a sheer face on the inside wall. It was against these faces that the roof of the corridors leaned. Wooden bars, there were few of iron in Alta California, secured the windows which gave onto the street.

The interior arrangement was one which gave comfort and spaciousness. In the west wing were the sleeping rooms with their little built-in niches for figures of saints. The east wing was composed of sala, reception rooms, dining room, kitchen and servants' rooms. The kitchen was at the furthest extremity of the wing and served for a servants' dining hall as well. Although many California houses did not have facilities for interior cooking, the kitchen of la casa de Estudillo had a magnificent open fireplace. With the hearth two feet above the floor proper, it was large enough to roast a whole sheep. All of the rooms were floored with wide tile except the sala, which had a wooden floor for dances.

There is an interesting note, left by a visitor,⁸

8. A. Robinson, Life in California during a residence of several years in that territory, comprising a description of the country and the missionary establishments, with incidents, observations etc., 76.

on the arrangement of some of the rooms. Alfred Robinson, an agent for an eastern trading house, lived in the house for several months in 1836.

The family in which I now resided at Sam Diego consisted of the old lady Dominguez, Don Jose Antonio Estudillo, and his wife Dona Victoria with two children and three servants.... My new lodgings unfortunately had no direct communication with the street except by a small window, so my customers were compelled to pass through the sala and sleeping apartment ere they could get access to my place of business.

Important parts of the early California houses were the patios and their gardens, around which the dwellings were built. The one in the Estudillo house was large; it measured about seventy-five feet wide by one hundred and fifty feet long. Running around all the inner sides of the house was an open corridor floored with tiles. There in the pleasant surroundings many of the household activities took place - as well as entertainment of guests. Flowers, trees and shrubs in profusion delighted the eye of the visitor when he entered, and cooled the air in the hot afternoons. A fountain in the middle of the inner or family patio threw a sparkling stream of water which tinkled into a large basin at its foot. At one corner next to the kitchen a large horno or bake oven opened its wide mouth. To use this "bee hive" oven, a fire was lighted which heated the thick walls through and through; then the fire was drawn out and the food to be

baked was placed inside.

The outer patio, which was entered by the "herdman's gate" from the inner one, was used for the heavier work of the household. Here were situated the olive press and similar bulky utensils. A frame work, for many years, supported seven bells which had come from the ruined mission. The institution of the patio had another important function. It furnished sun and light to every room in the house, for all had windows or doors opening onto the court.⁹ Though there were wrought iron locks on the doors, they rusted from disuse.

Furnishings for the house were conceived on the same lavish scale as the casa. The Estudillo family owned a silver mine located somewhere in Mexico. Silver bullion was sent to smiths in Mexico City, where the large, heavy, ornate service was made to order. The furniture was constructed of mahogany and rosewood which had been cut in the forests of Chiapas and Honduras. Used as ballast in Yankee hide ships, the wood had been brought to California and here converted into massive furniture by mission Indians. A single chair was as much as a sturdy man-servant could lift.¹⁰

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9. There are three very good descriptions of the Estudillo house. The best and fullest is in Clough, Ramona's marriage place. The second is in Newcomb, Old mission churches, 309-317. The third is in F. Rider, Rider's California, a guidebook for travelers, 601-602.
10. Clough, Ramona's marriage place.

For three generations, the house witnessed the life of the Estudillo family and of San Diego. It saw the passing of the old order and the coming of the new. When Alonzo Horton began the real estate boom which founded New San Diego, in the '60s and '70s, the old house and Old Town fell out of the way of the exciting advance of business life. While it served as residence for Don Jose Guadalupe and later Don Salvador, both sons of Don Antonio, it was beginning already to live with its memories. In 1887, Don Salvador abandoned it to the tender mercies of a faithless caretaker and took up his residence in Los Angeles.

Its early history made it a legitimate landmark for sightseers. The caretaker was glad to show tourists around for a small sum. More than that, if the price was made higher, the visitor could take, as a souvenir, anything he desired, from a piece of silver plate to the huge hand-wrought iron keys for the rusted locks. Such treatment was devastating, and soon the proud old casa was little more than a ruin.

Recognition of its once honorable state came in 1910, when John D. Spreckels donated generously for the proposed restoration. The work was supervised by Mrs. Hazel W. Waterman. Neither effort nor money was spared to rejuvenate the casa and to follow original plans and ideas. Much of the woodwork had to be replaced, especially sills, roof

timbers and lintels. Caresa, a marsh reed, brought from the Cuyamaca region, was used for a roofing foundation. To replace the tiles which were missing, an Indian pottery maker was imported from Mexico. Gaps in the patio were filled by tiles from the old mission aqueduct, which dates from about 1775. Once more the beams were bound with rawhide. The woodwork showed the effects of hand labor. The patio was replanted and is once more a riot of color as in the days of old.¹¹

Visitors and tourists from far-off lands now walk where Don Antonio and his esposa, Dona Victoria, were wont to stroll, for the casa is now a museum. The present owner, Mr. Getz, has continued adding to the collection until today it contains some unique articles of early California history. Among the most noteworthy are belongings of Horton, in the Horton room; a shrine from San Miguel Mission near Loreta, Baja California, and an old Spanish treasure chest which belonged to Don Antonio.

There is one more phase of the history of the Estudillo house which must be discussed. This is the persistent but erroneous belief that it was the marriage place of Ramona, the heroine of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel. It is better known by the false title, "Ramona's Marriage Place,"

11. Rider, Guidebook, 601.

than by its more staid but legitimate name. Much ink has been spilled in arguments as to whether it was the real marriage place of the prototype of the heroine, but the facts have been so obscured with legend that it is impossible to tell truth from fiction. But what is the difference? The old house witnessed many romantic episodes. Would Don Antonio, with his courteous manners, object to its being made the scene of such a happening? Nada! Never!

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