

Tracing Torrance History

# Dominguez Takes Over Huge San Pedro Rancho

(This is the third in a series of articles outlining the history of the Rancho San Pedro, now the city of Torrance, San Pedro, Compton, the beach cities, and other Southland cities.)

By R. C. GILLINGHAM

The history of the Rancho San Pedro begins with the record of the original grantees, Juan Jose Dominguez. A descendant of an illustrious Catalan family in northwestern Spain, Juan Jose was born about the year 1723 at the village of Tepic, in the southern part of Sinaloa, Mexico.

Like his father, he became a soldier at an early age and put in over 20 years of campaigning in northern Mexico before coming to California with the first colonizing expedition in 1769. As a cavalry trooper, he was known in those days as a "soldado de guerra" or "leather jacket," never attaining a rank higher than captain.

IN CALIFORNIA, after 13 years' service at the missions and presidios from Monterey to San Diego, Juan Jose retired in 1762, and went into stock-raising. The indications are that he had previously acquired a small herd of cattle. In the following year, he went north to the new Pueblo of Los Angeles, looking for a better site on which to graze his herd. At this time his former commander, Pedro Fages, had become governor of Alta California. As a result upon a petition from Dominguez, Governor Fages gave him a "permission" or provisional grant of the Rancho San Pedro in 1764 as a reward for his long military service to the Spanish Crown.

Thus it came about that in the late fall of 1764, Juan Jose set out from San Diego with some 200 head of cattle and 50 horses, and took possession of his newly acquired land.

THE RANCHO SAN Pedro, originally comprising more than 75,000 acres, was one of the largest of the early Spanish grants. It also was the first grant to be made in Los Angeles County. Its name was derived from the fact that it bordered on San Pedro Bay, so named by the Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino, who cast anchor there on St. Peter's Day, Nov. 26, 1602.

In terms of modern day geography, beginning at the Los Angeles River northeast of the City of Compton, its boundary extended west to the Pacific Ocean at Redondo Beach; from there turning south and east along the coastline to San Pedro and Wilmington, taking in all of the Palms Verdes Hills and the entire harbor area, including Terminal Island; then back up the Los Angeles River to the northeast side of Compton.

This was quite a good-sized farm, to put it mildly.

SOON AFTER HIS occupation of the Rancho, Dominguez built his home on the north-east slope of the hill near Del Amo and Alameda which still bears his name. This first house, a crude two-room adobe structure with an earthen floor, was "12 varas on each side," or slightly more than 33 square feet. Its roof was sealed with tar from the Brea pits. Stock corrals and huts for the vaqueros were built nearby.

The principal source of labor was the Susuga Indian tribe, whose village then was located on the low hill west of Wilmington and the inner bay, now the site of the Union Oil refinery and tank farm. The ruins of the original home have now entirely disappeared with the passing years.

THE RANCHO SAN Pedro made fair progress during the first decade, as measured by the standards of that day. A report for the year 1793 showed that "over 1000 cattle and many horses and mares" grazed on its lands. Juan Jose, getting on in years, left the active supervision of his stock to his "mayor domo" or foreman, Manuel Gutierrez. In fact, he appears to have resided on the Rancho only part of the time, staying for extended periods in San Diego.

During the absence of his employer, Gutierrez allowed his friend, Jose Dolores Sepulveda to graze his cattle on the west side of the Rancho, in the Palms Verdes area.

THIS "PERMISSION," which

continued informally for more than 30 years, later became the chief basis for the claim of the Sepulveda heirs to the Rancho Los Palms Verdes. On his return, Juan Jose protested this occupation, but never took any legal action to stop it during his lifetime. In later years, other "squatters" attempted to take over other sections of the Rancho.

Juan Jose also had two continuing arguments with his neighbor to the east, Manuel Nieto, who owned the Rancho Los Nietos. Nieto had been a corporal in the same company with Juan Jose under Pedro Fages. One of these disputes was over cattle ownership and grazing rights. With no fences to separate the stock of both ranches grazed together on the common range, inevitably becoming mixed. Charges of misappropriation of calves and other unbranded stock were hurled back and forth for more than 10 years. Torments of bodily violence were provoked largely because both men were too old to engage in personal combat.

THE OTHER controversy had to do with the exact boundary between the two ranches. This was the San Gabriel (Los Angeles) River, which normally should have provided a natural line. However, the main channel, which was very shallow, was altered almost every year by the winter floods, sometimes shifting east or west as much as a quarter mile. Neither of these disputes was settled during the lifetime of Dominguez or Nieto.

Aside from his military record, little is known as to other personal activities of Juan Jose Dominguez. The Pueblo records show that he was admitted as a citizen of Los Angeles, but took no part in its public affairs. While in California he never married and had no direct heirs, although there is some evidence that he may have had a child by an Indian

woman in Baja California. This allegation later was rejected by the Land Claims Commission in establishing proof of title.

SOON AFTER 1800, Juan Jose Dominguez became increasingly feeble, and his eyesight began to fail. In 1805, he went completely blind, and Manuel Gutierrez was given full charge of the Rancho. The aged man was taken to the Mission San Juan Capistrano, and was cared for in his last years by his nephew, Cristobal Dominguez, who was the sergeant in charge of the Mission guard. There the old "leather jacket" died in 1809, at the age of 86 years, being buried in the Mission cemetery.

BEFORE HIS DEATH, Juan Jose willed the Rancho San Pedro and other possessions to his nephew, Cristobal. He further stipulated that his farman, Manuel Gutierrez, was to have a lifetime interest for purposes of stock-grazing, and was to be in full charge until

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## B of A Puts Club Checks In the Mail

An active Christmas shopping season in Torrance was indicated today as Bank of America branch manager H. G. Frentz announced that 2750 Christmas Club checks totaling \$275,000 are being mailed to local residents.

This will be part of a state-wide distribution of a record \$63,500,000 in Christmas Club checks to \$17,000 Californians, Manager Frentz reported. Last year's figure was \$62,000,000.

Distribution of Christmas Club checks is made in November to enable club members to begin their holiday shopping early. These funds are also used as a source of ready cash for winter vacations, tax payments and end of the year expenses, the local banker said.

The tract was taken over by his nephew. With the passing of Juan Jose Dominguez, no change in the status of the Rancho San Pedro took place for more than 18 years; the act remaining in control of Manuel Gutierrez during the entire period.

Disputes over boundaries and possession rights of the Rancho continued for several years. Sunday's HERALD will detail how Cristobal Dominguez finally moved to gain clear title to the area.

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