

A tale of gold buried at Rancho Solano

By Jerry Bowen

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As early as 1835, Jose Francisco Armijo was believed to have visited the Suisun Valley area. It must have made a favorable impression on him, because he applied for and received a land grant in 1839 from Mariano Vallejo. It consisted of about 13,000 acres of Suisun Valley, extending from Suisun Marsh to Manka's Corners and in March 1840, Gov. Alverado granted final approval.

Armijo, along with his wife, children and several relatives settled in 1841 on the land southeast of Manka's Corners. Armijo began building a large herd of cattle and growing some fruit trees.

When the gold rush erupted in 1849, Armijo and other ranchers in the area made a fortune selling livestock and fruit in Sacramento to the hungry hordes of miners and settlers.

Armijo's health began to fail him in the late 1840s, which leads up to an interesting story.

I recently came across an intriguing article about the personal fortune of Armijo.

It was in the form of an article in the Solano Republican printed Sept. 11, 1896. The following is the text of that piece:

"A Strange Story Told by One Absent For Forty Years. Is It a Myth?

"Large Amounts of Coin Supposed to have Been Buried Near Suisun Being Searched For.

"A few days ago, a stranger arrived In Suisun, and hired a livery rig from Connally's stable for a day. After driving about the greater part of the day, he stopped at the home of a certain farmer, who resides in the foothills not a great distance from Suisun. To him, the stranger related a story that seemed almost incredible. He said he had been absent from that vicinity for over forty years, and dwelt upon the changed appearance of the surroundings during that length of time. When he left here he was a mere lad, and time had wrought great changes.

"The stranger was apparently in fair circumstances, and told his story in this way:

“He had come all the way from Mexico, where he had resided since leaving this vicinity. During the past forty years, he carried a secret in his breast, which was not confided to anyone until he related it to his present auditor last week. He said he was a nephew of Armijo, who at one time owned the greater portion of Suisun Valley, having acquired the same by a crown grant from the Mexican government. As is well known by those familiar with the early history of Solano County, Armijo was a man of great wealth, and while he lived in comfortable circumstances, it was always a mystery to those who knew of his wealth, as to what he had done with his money. The nephew, whose name has not been divulged, comes at this late day and unravels the mystery.

“It appears the stranger was Armijo’s favorite nephew, and previous to his departure with his parent to Mexico, his aged uncle, whose health was fast declining, imparted a secret to him as regarded the location of his wealth. Before leaving, Armijo took him to a certain tree on the ranch in question, which was marked on the trunk. He first exacted a promise from his nephew that no search would be made while he (Armijo) was living. He then told the boy that money to an immense amount, which he had accumulated, was buried not far from the tree he had marked, and that when his death occurred, the nephew could claim it as his own, but he was never to attempt to find it during his uncle’s lifetime.

“Shortly afterwards, the nephew took his departure for Mexico; but of late, night after night he has dreamed of the large sacks of hidden gold, and could see the exact location of its burial. So vividly was this impressed upon his mind, he could no longer resist the temptation to come to California.

“Having related his story, the two men started out in search of the tree, and despite the changes that had taken place during his long absence, by some instinct the stranger led the way to the spot, which was in a distant field. There, just as he had described, the marks appeared in evidence. The story ends here for a time, awaiting the results of explorations instituted.

“Armijo not having told him the exact spot of the hidden vault, prospecting is now going on, and ere long we expect to be able to announce a discovery of the hidden deposit of wealth.”

After reading the above article, I researched a year’s worth of newspapers after the date of the piece and found absolutely no follow-up.

Was it a hoax? Maybe ... maybe not.

If the nephew was smart and he found it, it would have been prudent for him to leave quickly, unannounced. It wasn’t too safe to be running around with a fortune in gold in

those days when everyone knew about it.

I decided to investigate a little further. I checked Armijo's probate. He died in 1851 and there were attempts to force the heirs to sell large chunks of the 13,000 acres to settle about \$1,000 in indebtedness. If the heirs knew where Armijo's "bank" was, surely they could have paid off the debts and there would have been no reason to sell land to settle accounts.

It is almost certain that Armijo would have had plenty of money in the form of gold coin because he had been selling cattle and fruit in much demand in Sacramento to hungry miners at very high prices.

I doubt very seriously if Armijo's secret hoard could still exist today. More than likely, the tree with the mark on it would have been reasonably close to his adobe where he could keep an eye on it and has been eliminated. Armijo's adobe home site and the nearby family grave site are now under the homes and golf course of Rancho Solano.

No, the remains in the graveyard are not still there. They were moved to a new location when construction began.

The entire area has been dug, scraped, filled and built on. If Armijo's secret were still there, someone would have probably found it.

Of course there are always folks that are not easily convinced. If you see one of those golfers knocking off exceptionally large divots, you might want to check him out!

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