

Mystery of his wealth outlives Armijo

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This column continues the story of the Armijo Family and the Tolenas grant. It was inspired by an untitled and unpublished set of articles on Jose Francisco Armijo by David A. Weir, the former publisher of the Solano Republican and author of the biography on Capt. R. Waterman. I am grateful to Ian Thompson for a copy of this manuscript.

With their family established in two adobes on their Tolenas Rancho, the Armijo Clan settled into the lifestyle of wealthy Californios. They had brought cattle with them, as well as purchasing additional animals. Their hides and tallow were valuable commodities, sold as far away as Los Angeles.

Many years later, Luzena Stanley Wilson recorded her observations of the Spanish families, as she was "quite unfamiliar with the manner and customs of the Spanish people..."

She described the bustling adobes and, to her, exotic clothing of the Vaca, Pena and Armijo families with all the typical prejudices the new Anglo-American settlers held against the far more relaxed Californio lifestyle: "An army of vaqueros congregated every day about the settlement, smoked cigarettes, ran races, played cards for high stakes and drank bad whisky in unlimited quantities.

"The man of position felt proud of his patrician blood, and condescended when he addressed his surrounding inferiors. He wore a broad sombrero, gold-laced jacket and wide bell-decked pantaloons, girt his waist with a flaming sash, wore jangling spurs at his heels, large, clanking, silver spurs, swung a lariat with unerring aim and in the saddle looked like a centaur. The belles of the valley coquetted with the brave riders, threw them melting glances from the eyes, and whispered sweet nothings in the melodious Spanish tongue. ... I remember well the pretty faces and manly figures of the Armijos, Picos, Penas and Berryessas ..."

A true Californio did not walk if he could ride, and horses were kept close to the adobe buildings at all times. "The vaquero and his horse were inseparable," remarked Luzena, "even while he drank his whisky at the roadside 'deadfull' he retained his hold on the lariat of the horse grazing 50 feet away outside. He ate, drank, and slept in the saddle; and even if he lay down under a tree for the night, the horse was in constant requisition for a breathless gallop across country after the stampeding cattle."

Luzena's recollections reflect the time shortly after 1850, when settlers were still few and far, and one's closest neighbor might live half a day's ride away. The Californios with their close-knit family ties often enjoyed colorful fiestas. These fiestas were one of the social highlights, drawing visitors on horseback over long distances. Luzena Stanley Wilson was invited and commented on the colorful clothing, unfamiliar customs of behavior and the unfamiliar food and drinks served.

But parallel to Luzena's charming descriptions of a colorful society ran a darker side, hinting at the true difficulties in developing a new society. Law and order still pretty much rested with each individual. The influx of disgruntled gold miners and squatters, who disregarded the Mexican land grants, often resulted in violent actions. Few official local sources have survived, making this aspect much harder to document.

When Jose Francisco Armijo received his grant, it was with the admonishment to cooperate with the remaining Suisun Indians still living in the area. Bancroft's History of California contains the information that in July 1847, Antonio Armijo and two English settlers, Eggers and Smith, rode to an Indian village in the Sacramento Valley. They captured a large number of Indians, killing 12 of them, including at least one child. A tantalizing handwritten line at the Solano County Genealogical Society further notes that in 1849, Antonio was acquitted in court for killing the 12 Indians and enslaving another 40.

Squatters became an ongoing threat to landowners. In an undated note, pioneer resident Henry Martin talked about several unmarked graves near the small Armijo burial site situated on a hill near Mankas Corner. Two miners, who lived close by the Armijo adobe and who were found one day butchering a steer belonging to the Armijo herd, are believed to be buried in two of those graves. While Martin did not accuse the Armijos of shooting the miners, he did add this comment to the note:

"It was common knowledge that Antonio and 'the wild one' 'El Desierto,' the nickname for Antonio's younger brother Juan Filipe was able to shoot the eye out of a tree squirrel at 50 yards - either eye."

Juan Filipe also lived up to his nickname as a member of the San Francisco Vigilantes Committee during the years 1852 to 1856.

Due to the loosely defined borders of the land grant, Jose Armijo was plagued with land disputes early on. The first such claim arose between him and Chief Solano over land along Suisun Creek. In 1907, Judge John Currey, who worked on many of the land disputes, wrote down his recollections:

"... Chief Solano had the right to the Suisun Rancho, and after him General Vallejo had

that right. Armijo established himself within his borders ... and pastured his cattle in the Suisun Valley, claiming all the valley east of Suisun Creek. They had a legal controversy in respect to the matter and submitted the question of true boundary between the two ranchos to arbitration (in 1847), each party choosing one of the arbitrators. Gen. Vallejo chose Cayetano Juarez of Napa, and Armijo chose Salvadore Vallejo, a brother of Gen. Vallejo ...”

Despite the ruling that Suisun Valley belonged to the Suisun Rancho, the Armijos continued to graze their cattle there. On the other hand, they ignored the northeastern part of their grant, which stretched to the “Oolootatis Creek.”

According to Judge Currey, the Vaca and Pena families, “Emboldened by Armijo’s indifference, ... encroached more and more upon the valley and eventually builded for themselves adobe houses near a small lake on the south side of the valley ...

“... Gen. Vallejo, who was the great man of the country, was their friend, and at the same time, no friend of Armijo. Under these circumstances, it is provable that Vaca and Pena felt quite safe in their possessions. From all I Judge Currey ever learned of Armijo, he lacked enterprise and neglected his opportunity of becoming the possessor of an estate of inestimable beauty and fertility, one of the most delightful spots in California.”

Sometime in late 1849, Jose Francisco Armijo died, possibly of pneumonia, followed shortly by his wife. The following year also saw the death of his eldest son, Antonio. All three were buried in the family’s burial site near their adobe.

The remaining children inherited the rancho, but had their ownership challenged on account of not having worked and improved the land. In 1857, the court ruled in their favor. They also received the patent for their land in 1868. But squatters had taken over large portions of the land and despite a number of lawsuits, the Armijo children were unable to keep much of their land grant. David Weir quotes an unnamed source as saying “The honest, trusting Armijos pinned too much faith in their attorney and as a result of his lethargy and love of his fishing tackle - and some say his bottle - lost much of their land and livestock.” What they were able to keep was slowly sold over the years. The last surviving son, Jesus Armijo, died unmarried in Fairfield in 1906, aged 61. His profession was given as laborer.

The poet Edwin Markham captured the spirit of Jose Francisco Armijo in a belated obituary in the Solano Republican of 1858, saying: “He was one of those rare spirits that the years could not touch with age - a being that never outgrew the eager heart of boyhood. He seemed ever to live on some shining tract above the commercialisms and conventions of the world. If he ever did go further along the common way, it was as a

romantic youth finding the rose of life well worth the hidden thorn. He cheered the road for all who traveled it, leaving friends at every parting of the ways. All hearts will wish him fair fortune on the uncharted trails where he now seeks new scenes to explore under stranger and fairer stars.”

One last mystery remains unsolved. According to an article in the Solano Republican sometime in the 1890s, a nephew of Jose Armijo returned to the area, claiming that Armijo had buried much of his great wealth. “... previous to his departure with his parents 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 had a mark on its trunk. He first extracted 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 distant from the tree he had marked...”

According to the article, the nephew was able to identify the tree and commence searching for the hidden treasure. “Armijo, not having told him the exact spot of the hidden vault,” ran the last paragraph of the article, “prospecting is now going on, and ere long we expect to be able to announce a discovery of the hidden deposit of wealth.” Alas, there was no follow-up article, and thus ends the story of the Armijo family.

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