

Armijo family prospered on Tolenas land grant

By Nancy Dingler

Saturday, February 22, 2003

Solano County was originally made up of six Spanish/Mexican land grants, all acquired by General Mariano Vallejo.

He encouraged Mexican and American citizens to settle in Northern California, purchase land from Vallejo, raise cattle and their own little empires. One of those families were the Armijos, who arrived in the Suisun Valley around 1842.

In 1848, just two years after the Bear Flag Party established the Republic of California at Sonoma, President James Polk, as a political promise of "Manifest Destiny," took Texas, California, New Mexico and Arizona from Mexico.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that came out of the "war" promised to honor the Mexican land grants. Of course, when California became a state, the treaty's terms were tested in the courts, causing many of the land grants to be lost to the original grantees.

Mariano Vallejo's six grants in Solano county consisted of:

The Suscol: Lying in the southern and western portion - including townships of Vallejo and Benicia.

The Suisun: Lying to the east of the Suscol, including within its limits the whole of Suisun Valley, together with the towns of Suisun and Fairfield.

The Tolenas, or Armijo: Lying to the north and east of the Suisun. The Los Putos or Vaca and Pena: Lying to the northeast of the Armijo, covering the town of Vacaville and the whole of Vaca valley.

The Rio Los Putos or Wolfskill: Lying to the northwest of the Los Putos and on both sides of Putah creek, both Solano and Yolo counties.

The Ulpinos or Bidwell: Located in the eastern portion of the county, at the junction of the Sacramento River and Cache Slough, covering the town of Rio Vista and the Montezuma hills.

Jose Francisco Armijo, through Vallejo, made a formal request of the Mexican

government for the purchase of the Tolenas land grant. In 1840 Governor Alvarado granted Armijo's request and issued a new grant of three square leagues.

In 1842, Jose brought his four sons, wife and daughter and 100 head of cattle from New Mexico and built an adobe house about 5 miles northwest of Fairfield.

The Armijo family prospered in this vast land, where their nearest neighbors were the Vacas and Penas of Vaca Valley and Chief Solano on his ranch near Rockville.

The Suisun Grant was given to Chief Solano, separate from Vallejo - but was acquired by Vallejo, when it was contended that the Chief abandoned it. When the Armijo patriarch, Jose Francisco died unexpectedly in 1849, there was already a dispute between the Armijos and Vallejo over the exact boundary location of the Suisun and Tolenas grants.

Vallejo instituted a legal action of trespass against the Armijos. Under Mexican law, all legal disputes were brought before the local Alcalde (justice of the peace). In this case, the Alcalde was L.W. Boggs.

Vallejo claimed that a certain Arroyo Seco, or dry gulch, formed the line, placing the boundary quite a way to the north. The difference in question involved several thousand acres of land. It was finally agreed that the matter would be submitted to two arbitrators, whose decision was final.

Jose's son, Antonio, had this legal suit thrust upon him after his father's death. The arbitrators were assigned. Cajetano Juarez was selected for Vallejo, and ironically Salvador Vallejo (Mariano's brother) was selected for the Armijos.

One might instantly jump to the conclusion that the deck was stacked against Antonio. As it turned out, a civilized and fair judgment was rendered. Antonio presented documents that his father had gathered before his death. They clearly determined that the dry gulch was part of the Tolenas grant.

For a time, the matter was regarded as settled, but the question came up again when Archibald A. Ritchie purchased Vallejo's interest and procured a United States patent for a large tract of land, which included in its limits, the controversial boundary. He sold one-third of this acquisition to Capt. Robert Waterman.

The Ritchie/Waterman party claimed that the patent was superior to the award made by the arbitrators, though their decision had been made before the Ritchie claim.

For a time, bitter warfare, with frequent acts of violence and bloodshed, was waged by

both sides, in and out of court. The case was finally decided upon appeal to the Supreme Court in the famed Waterman vs. Smith legal decision.

The dispute continued for several years, until compromises were agreed to. When finally the disputes were all settled and over with, the land rapidly increased in value, amply repaying those who had succeeded in retaining their claims after so many years of stubborn and tenacious warfare.

By 1858, Waterman decided to enhance the value of the property by giving four city blocks to the township of Fairfield, with the proviso that the county seat be moved from Benicia. Put to a vote, the measure was approved and the first buildings were erected in Court House Square.

By 1893, at the south end of this square, the town built the first high school and named it after the Armijo family. It was a wooden two-story Queen Anne-style building.

By 1913, it was decided that the town needed a large and more ornate high school. The new school was designed by architect Henry Smith. It was to be a neo-classical style to complement the courthouse on Union Avenue that was completed in 1911.

The "new" Armijo high school faced Union Avenue from Texas Street and was completed by 1915. Then tragedy struck the beautiful, new Armijo High in 1929. A fire swept through the building, destroying almost everything.

According to newspaper reports, the fire was caused by faulty wiring. All that remained was the four outer walls. Teachers, students and staff were scattered in buildings throughout the city, including Suisun, while insurance claims allowed for the rebuilding to its former splendor and the reopening a year later.

Over the years, the Tolenas/Armijo grant was broken up through inheritance and land sales. In 1970, the school district sold the high school for \$1 to Solano County to become the Hall of Justice, because of failing earthquake standards. The Armijo name lives on in the present "modern" high school.

Nancy Dingler is a Vacaville resident, writer and historian. You can e-mail her at History_Whiz10@yahoo.com.

Support the museum plan. Maggie Halls and The Solano Historical Society, as well as others interested in the history of Solano County are trying to get a county museum established in Fairfield. Display cases are going to be available at City Hall exhibiting some of the artifacts and photos that have been in private collections. Local history is rapidly disappearing.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a safe repository for this history? If you concur, please let county and city officials know of your support for a museum.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/442>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/442/>