Tales of the Vasco

Being the Stories of a Rancher from France, an Abandoned Wife who took to the Law, a Cowboy who got on the Wrong Side of the Law, a Much Loved Ranch Woman, and an Archaeologist, all Reconstructed from the Authentic Sources

by

Adrian Praetzellis, Grace H. Ziesing, and Mary Praetzellis
The Vasco
As constructed from the Authentic Sources & Accounts

To Brentwood

Old Vasco Road
Kellogg Creek
Stanislaus Creek

Vasco Adobe
Cabral's sheep camp

Bordes Place

Brusly Creek

Valenzuela's Homestead

Sunol Adobe

Barnes Place

To Livermore

Brushy Peak
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Prepared for

The Los Vaqueros Project
Contra Costa Water District
Concord, CA

1997
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The portraits that we have constructed in this booklet are based on historic documents, interviews, and archaeological finds. This information was assembled over several years by the staff of the Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University, including ourselves; Karana Hattersley-Drayton interviewed former residents of the Vasco and Elaine-Maryse Solari researched the area’s surprisingly dramatic legal history. The manuscript was edited by Suzanne B. Stewart and formatted by Maria Ribeiro.

The members of several historic Vasco families helped us with photographs and letters from their relatives, as well as generously sharing their own research. In particular, we thank Frank Silva, Mary Vallerga, Frances Cabral, Terry Rooney, Anne Homan, and Carol Hovey.

This booklet would not have come into being without the support of Contra Costa Water District's Los Vaqueros Project. In cooperation with the US Bureau of Reclamation, State Water Resources Control Board, and State Office of Historic Preservation, the Water District prepared a Historic Properties Treatment Plan to ensure that important archaeological sites, historic buildings, and other cultural resources that would be affected by the reservoir project would be studied and treated appropriately. Tales of the Vasco is one way in which the Water District has ensured that the public is made aware of the results of these studies. In particular, we thank Janice Hutton, the Los Vaqueros Project's Environmental Coordinator for her support, understanding, and skilled coordination.

In their various ways, these colleagues have made important contributions both to this slim volume and to others that document the Vasco's past - a story that has nearly disappeared from both memory and landscape.

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Today the hills of eastern Contra Costa County are dry, rugged, and uninhabited. Yet archaeologists tell us that people have lived here for thousands of years.

In the 1840s, after Native Americans had been forced from the area, it became the domain of Mexican and Californio ranchers who raised cattle for the hide and tallow trade. To its Spanish-speaking residents, the area was known as Cañada de Los Vaqueros, the Valley of the Cowboys.

In the later 19th and early 20th centuries, the region was home to families of ranchers, sharecroppers, and sheepraisers, as well as lone, itinerant cowboys. They came from such a variety of places – Ireland, Italy, Spain, France, and the islands of the Azores, as well as Mexico and southern California – that many locals learned to speak two or three languages to converse with their neighbors. Some of the earliest and most colorful settlers were a group of hard-living Basque cattle ranchers. In their memory, locals dubbed the district “The Vasco.” It was a remarkable place indeed!

When the Contra Costa Water District [CCWD] began planning to build a dam and reservoir in the valley of Kellogg Creek, officials recognized that many important archaeological sites would inevitably be damaged or destroyed. To make up for this, CCWD sponsored research into historic documents, interviews with elderly residents, and archaeological excavations to gather information about the way of life “on the Vasco.” All of the places on the Vasco where the people featured in these stories lived – the Vasco and Suñol adobes, and the Bonfante and Bordes ranches were recorded by archaeologists from Sonoma State University.

The life stories of many forgotten people came to light while we were collecting these data. For the most part, they were ordinary folk who neither wrote about themselves nor were memorialized by others. An obituary in the Byron Times was as close as most would get to a biography. This small volume is a tribute to these people whose vanished way of life would seem quite alien to most modern Americans – while not so far separated in time.

This was an era when most people lived in the countryside. A time of family ranches and the one-roomed Vasco School. The romanticized view of 19th-century rural life invented by Hollywood and sentimental novelists was strictly for urban consumption. For many people, ranch life was exhausting, lonely, and sometimes dangerous. Women could expect to outlive at least some of their children. Many men did not live to enjoy their old age and retirement, but wore themselves out in a lifetime of meeting the demands of ranch life.

The stories in this pamphlet are fact-based works of fiction. As social scientists, the authors have a respect for the hard data of history, and yet we empathize with the people we have studied. We wonder – would we have liked them had we met them?

Our stories are neither The Objective Truth nor, as you can see from the figure on the facing page, are they constructed out of thin air. The scenarios – an interview, meetings, and a correspondence – are pure invention, but all the historic characters actually lived on the Vasco. We have reconstructed the details of their lives from a variety of sources. However, we will never know their motivations, emotions, attitudes, or thoughts; nor whether they would approve of how we have pictured them.

Like all works of fiction – and more works of “science” than many people would like to admit – there is a great deal of the authors themselves in these portraits. We hope that you enjoy them for what they are.
A Portion of *The Tale of Fermín Valenzuela*
and Sources used to Create it

The building was a blacksmith’s shop, and something of a novelty to me, a San Franciscan of the mid-20th century. The shed that we approached was open to the air, the roof supported by a series of wooden posts (1). There was a central brick and stone platform which even I could recognize as the forge where the blacksmith would heat his iron (2). At one end was suspended a great bellows (3), its nose plugged into the stonework, ready to deliver the blast of air that kept the fire hot and the metal malleable enough to work. Mr. Valenzuela was a tall man, perhaps six feet in height, and lean. I will admit that I was a little disappointed in his appearance, expecting, if not flowing hair in the Buffalo Bill mode, at least some distinguishing feature. He wore a small black mustache and had a remarkably ruddy complexion (4). Although he was apparently in his sixties (5), he had the vigor and appearance of a much younger man (6).

The introductions were made, my Postmaster presenting me as a university student doing research. At this, Mr. Valenzuela nodded somberly as if to say that any kind of odd inquiry might be expected from such a one. We withdrew to a corner of the hut where a table and some unsteady chairs served as the smith’s parlor and luncheon room (7). The floor was just dirt, but paved with tiny pieces of black slag, waste from the forge (8). From the collection of empty wine bottles piled in the corner (9), I had the impression that Mr. Valenzuela had spent many an enjoyable evening out here. Seeing my sideways glance, my Postmaster pointed out that like other ranchers on the Vasco, Mr. Bonfante made wine and grappa—a strong Italian liquor—(10) and stored the bottles here to reuse time and again.

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The Sources

3. Interview with Bonfante and Cabral, 1995, conducted by Karana Hattersley-Drayton. On file at ASC.
4. Interview with Vallerga and Sod, 1995; interview with Mourterot, 1993, conducted by Karana Hattersley-Drayton. On file at ASC.
5. U.S. Census, Population Schedule for 1920, Township 14, Household 18 Contra Costa County, California.
10. Interview with Vallerga and Sod, 1995, conducted by Karana Hattersley-Drayton. On file at ASC.
LOUIS PERES AND HIS LEGAL TROUBLES

Louis Peres (1824-1897) was a pawnbroker, rancher, and slaughterhouse owner with interests in San Francisco and on the Vasco. He was involved in litigation for much of his adult life. The huge cost of his legal battles drove this French immigrant to near bankruptcy. "Money" said Peres, "would slip through my hands like water." These legal documents represent only a few of Peres's cases – most of which he lost.
Some years ago, Mr. Bancroft, whose interest you must surely know is in preserving the arcane experiences of our state’s pioneers, sent me to interview an old French gentleman by the name of Louis Peres in his house in Oakland. I arrived at the appointed time in the morning and was admitted by his daughter Lucy, an amiable young lady of some 20 years who, I understand, is a teacher of foreign languages. Mr. Peres received me in the drawing room and, while agreeable enough, at first seemed wary, perhaps not understanding why anyone should think his life story worth setting down for posterity. I hope that the reader will not think me ungracious if I venture that his English was heavily accented. Nonetheless, his speech was slow enough that I feel that the transcription that appears before you is true in its particulars.

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Je m’appelle Louis Peres. I'm a Frenchman not a Spaniard. So you must say it “Lew-ee” not Luis, you understand?

Yes, I was born in France. But what was there in France for me? Everyone said that America was the place where a man could make his pile. So when I was a man of 35 years I took a boat and a wagon and I’ve forgotten what else, and I ended up in San Francisco. And where does a Frenchman stay in a city where he don’t know no one and don’t speak English so good? Why at that time he’d go to the Hotel de L’Europe over on Kearney and that’s what I did. That must have been in about ’60.

The hotel owner was old Daniel Orlette, a Frenchman like myself, but not a Jew. Not that I worried much on that account. My second wife, now she’s the religious one. But that comes later. And if I’m to tell my story I’d best say how things followed each other in right order.

Within a couple a years I had a nice little business going on and Maria, my first wife, and me lived over the shop in the 700 block of Commercial Street. A pawnbroker’s it was. Just like a bank. Lending a little money, you know. Sometimes you’d see the same things come in every week and get redeemed a day or so later, week after week you’d see them. But that was only a beginning because my wife was a Higuera, you see.

Who were the Higuera? Why only some of the earliest Spanish settlers over in Contra Costa County. I call them Spanish but they were Mexicans. Got given part of the Vasco by the Mexican government way before the Americans came to California. Over 17,000 acres over north of Livermore. They ran cattle and horses over the range before there were fences out there and then sold most of it to a group of Basques who’d come up from Argentina.

Many Americans know nothing of the Basques. They come from the south part of France and the northern part of Spain. Their language isn’t French and it isn’t Spanish either. They’re a nation without a country, you could say, but they know who they are. Now these Basques I’m talking about, the Bascos as people called them, had learned all about cattle ranching in Argentina. And another thing they’d learned from the gauchos was to carry those great fáccon, long dueling knives. Do you know that they’d not shoot a man if he insulted them? No, they just fight man to man with those knives.

My partner, Pedro Altube, he was a Basco. But he didn’t need any knife. Palo Alto we called him. That’s “Tall Tree” in English. Six feet seven inches tall he was. You think I’m just talking? No. It’s all true. Pedro was a rough man, a hard living man if you know what I mean. You know what he’d say when he met a man he knew? He’d say “Hey now sonofabitch my friend, come and drink with me.” That’s what he’d say. And you’d drink with him, I’ll tell you that!

So Pedro and me we got to be partners in a slaughterhouse operation in about ’63. We’d ride down
to southern California, buy a herd of cattle, and drive 'em back to his ranch out at the Vasco. Then Pedro he fattens them up and drives them over to our slaughterhouse. It was a good little business. Now, back then when I'm talking about there were few fences on the range. Everyone's cattle grazed altogether like. So once a year we make a rodeo, a round up, you know? Out there on the Vasco we built these big corrals. Made of rock they were and six feet high from the ground. Still there, if you care to look. And then once a year the vaqueros, the cowboys as you say it in American, would round up all those range cattle and bring them together. And then they'd separate them by their owners, you know. And then each man would brand his cattle with his own brand.

What happened was this. The Spanish men, the Mexicans – Higuera, Miranda, and Alviso – got the Vasco from Mexico, and each of them sold off his share in the land. But they weren't so careful about how they said what was their share. So some of the buyers thought they were getting the whole Vasco. Soon, if you counted up all the shares in the Vasco that had been sold you'd come to over 200 percent. And do you know that this trouble has cost me most of my fortune over the last thirty years. And this is where all the trouble started between the Bascos and Juan Suñól, a Spaniard from Spain.

Suñól had his house on the side of the big valley out there in the early '50s. Like everyone, Suñól raised cattle. But the Bascos believed that they owned the Vasco and they did every thing they could to get Suñól to get out of there. Remember now, that these Bascos were young men, only in their late teens, and all fired up. One day Garat, he went out and cut the tails and manes off of all Suñól's horses. This is all true. The sheriff came out and they put him on trial. Now that was a cruel thing to do, for horses need their hair to get rid of flies you know. And it was an insult to Suñól, to his manhood.

In the early days, a man could sell anything he could get up to the goldfields. Beef prices were high. But the '60s were hard years to be in the cattle business. We all suffered. You don't remember this. The winter of 1861-62 was bad. There was great flooding. The rivers all overflowed, cattle were drowned, pasture was destroyed. The city of Sacramento was flooded three feet deep all over I'm telling you. And then there was a drought, and
then grasshoppers that ate the rangeland down in southern California.

The fact is, the Bascos wanted to get some big holdings in the San Joaquin Valley to run more cattle, but they couldn’t because Miller and Lux had got there first. Do you know that Miller and Lux owned just about all the grazing land between Modesto and Madera? Lux was a Frenchman, so you know he was no fool. What they did was to buy up all the land along the San Joaquin River. It was swampy at the time and nobody could figure out what to do with it. But Miller and Lux knew. Since they controlled the water no one else could use the land nearby, so they bought up thousands of acres cheap and used it for pasture. No one in the cattle business could compete with them. Soon the Bascos decided that they didn’t like California so well and they started looking at building up a ranch over in Nevada. And for a while they shipped cattle to me on the railroad all the way from Elko, Nevada.

The cattle business was going well. I took care of the slaughterhouse and the meat packing in San Francisco while Pedro and his Bascos raised the beef out on the Vasco. Then in 1871 the city told us that we had to pack up our operation and move it out from the Potrero to the New Butchertown area, south of Market. It’s always the same. You build up a business and the lawyers find some way to mess with you. Sure it smelled some. But we’d been there for years and it didn’t seem right that they could just tell you “Go.”

So this new area was down miles out of the city. And it wasn’t even dry land. You think I’m just talking? No it’s true. You must know that much of San Francisco is built on filled land. Well this is how it got that way. We had to pay for it to be filled in, for that’s where the city said we had to have our business. All the slaughterhouses would have to be there. The contractor would drive piles into the mud and build walls around them. Then they’d bring in wagon loads of sand from the dunes over by Mission Bay and dump it. Sometimes they’d bring in a load of trash and dump that in there. Maybe one day when we’re all forgotten maybe someone will find that trash and wonder how it got there, you think so?

Now, I am no man to leave my business to others. You know what Benjamin Franklin said? “Not to oversee workmen is to leave them your purse open.” Yes, I always like to know what goes on out at the Vasco. So most every summer even when my girls were young we would stay out there beginning in hay harvest time. Do you know when that is? That’s about June time. Now my wife, she didn’t care for that. Look around you. She would rather stay in Oakland in a fine house with water from the pump and friends to visit and such. But we’d go there all the same.

My Lucy remembers that — don’t you, my little one, ma petite? How we lived in the old adobe house and all. Mother didn’t care for that did she? No she did not! The Bascos built the place in about ‘56. Even though there was plenty of wood, they built it of adobe bricks. People don’t build like that no more.

This mother-of-pearl button with a Star of David motif was discovered by archaeologists at the Vasco Adobe; it was probably lost from a woman’s or child’s blouse. Peres, a Jew, lived at the Adobe in the 1870s and 1880s with his wife, Palmyre Levi, and their young daughters. (Drawing by Nelson Thompson)

This is how they do it. First you dig a trench how big you want the house. Then you get flat rocks and put them in the trench and build the rocks a few inches higher than the ground. Why? This stops the adobe from getting wet. Then you make the bricks. Not real bricks, you understand, just a mix of clay mud and straw dried in the sun. Big they are and heavy. Then you stack them and bind them with more mud and put a roof on and that’s all.

Well that’s what the Bascos did out there. And they lived there for years in the house. Ten of them
altogether. The house was about 18 by 36 feet. Tacked on one end there was a little kitchen. Lucy remembered that great stone fireplace don't you, ma petite? That's where the Bascos would smoke their meat. And outside, on the back of the chimney there was this little oven, a bread oven it was with a top like a dome. And the floor was of hard red bricks, for Pedro's brother had learned the art of the hornero, the brickmaking, in Argentina. A bread oven it was but not like an oven in a house.

This is how it cooked. In the morning a Basco built a fire in the oven. He'd get it all hot for it to heat the stones and the floor up good. And then he'd rake out the ashes and put in the dough and close it up good and tight. And the bread would bake. This is the way Basques make bread. But when we were there the oven had fallen down and my Palmyra she didn't want to bake no bread. She didn't want to be there at all, as I said. No, ma petite, your papa is not cruel, he just speaks as things were.

Before we went to live at the adobe I made some changes for Mama's sake. First, my man put in a wood-plank floor, and then walls inside the house, for we would have my dear girl's governess with us. And glass in the windows. In the kitchen he put in a cast-iron stove and edged the great fireplace with bricks from the old oven so that ma petite should not fall in.

Outside, the yard was paved with great slabs of rock so as to keep the dust down. And then I had my man take all the trash and such that the Bascos left and throw it into the pit that they had dug for clay. More than a man's height in depth that pit was. He filled it up though, so that ma petite should not fall. All these things a man does for his family, you know.

But I was there for business, you understand. Since I could not manage the whole ranch myself I put it out to sharecroppers, for a man will work harder for himself than for another. One-fifth of the crop or the increase in animals is what I got, one-fifth. And none of this was written on paper, you understand. All on a handshake and a promise. That is how things was, but not now that the lawyers and the judges have their way. Sylvain Bordes was my foreman out there. A Frenchman as you might know, and nephew to old Dan Orlette who owned the Hotel de L'Europe in San Francisco. Sylvain would hire workers, farm boys, straight over from France to work the ranch. They'd go to the hotel, you know, hoping that there'd be work on some local Frenchman's ranch, and Orlette would send them here.

I was a horseman at the time, a fair horseman, and Sylvain and me we'd ride over the hills, check fences and bring in strays and such. Hard work this was and dangerous work, although you may think it a lark.

San Francisco, No. 96.

IN THE
SUPREME COURT
OF THE
STATE OF CALIFORNIA.

LOUIS PERES,

vs.

MARY IVES CROCKER et al.,

Appellant,

Respondents.

PETITION FOR REHEARING IN BANC.

Noble Hamilton,

R. M. E. Soto,

Of Counsel for Appellant.

Filed this 28th day of March A. D. 1897.

T. H. Ward, Clerk.

By

Deputy Clerk.

Peres's last case. A lower court dealt Peres a heavy blow when it found that his ranch was the property of heiress Mary Crocker. In a final attempt to save his ranch, Peres appealed to the California Supreme Court, which refused to reconsider his case. Within a year, Louis Peres was dead.
One time there was that I remember, when _ma petite_ was quite young, we was out on the Vasco and Sylvain near lost his life. We was looking for horses out in the hills there and came to a ravine, a steep one. Now Sylvain was a horseman, but somehow going down that ravine, his saddle got loose and turned over on him. His horse hit him with one foot in the breast and one right on the nose and on the back of his hand so bad that it peeled the flesh off. Well that horse ran off with the saddle under its belly and I went over to Bordes expecting the worst. He told me after that I was as white as death. And why should I not be? Later, when he married, I gave him a portion of the Vasco for his own, he and his wife Minnie Barnes as was.

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Mr. Peres, who had warmed to his subject better than I had dared to hope, now appeared tired and requested that Miss Peres prepare some of his invigorating tonic.

After she had left the room, Mr. Peres allowed as how his daughter Lucy was "a clever girl in the books," but young and devoted to her mother. "I have had a life, and troubles have been great in the last years, but why should the young worry about it."

He sought reassurance that his confidences would be kept until after he had gone to his final rest "which, I fear, may be sooner than my family believes." I assured him that his wishes would, of course, be honored in this matter. At this he nodded firmly, as if coming to a decision, and continued.

Now, my Palmyra is a religious woman, a well-brought up woman. She has always taught the girls to act as Jews should and to go to synagogue here in Oakland. And such a monument she put up over there at Mountain View cemetery to her poor sister Adele, may her memory be a blessing. In Hebrew and all it is. All very religious and proper. But you should know that I was married once before, to a Mexican woman, a Catholic, and by whom I have a child. So you may understand that Maria Antonia Higuera is not spoken of in this house. As people do, we separated after a few years together. But I began to do well in the business and she pressed me for a portion of my share of the Vasco and filed a paper against me. No one can say that I treated her badly for I gave her $8,000 in settlement. And that was an end to it.

Pedro ran the cattle-raising side, but more and more did he and the other Bascos spend time out at our ranch in Nevada. The Spanish Ranch we called it. Over 18,000 acres of grazing land, but so far away. So one day Pedro comes to me and proposes that we split our partnership. This was in '79 or '80. So I say yes and we do it. Pedro and the rest would get the Spanish Ranch and I got the Vasco. Looking back on it, I don't know but they got the better side of the bargain. We had some bad years and had to take a $70,000 loan on the land from Pierre Dupuy, a man who had worked with me, who I thought I could trust. And that I had to pay off.

But that was not the worse of it. I have said how the first Mexican owners sold or gave away more land than was their's to give and how this set off court battles that have not even now ended. One claim on the Vasco was from a man whose name I cannot say without disgust, for he has caused me more suffering than floods, coyotes, and crooked lawyers: Simon Blum.

This criminal claimed that my ownership deed was a forgery and that he himself was the owner. Well I fought him. The judge, who was old and so stupid, took seven years to decide the case in the criminal's favor. I appealed and got a new hearing. But this Blum, he is clever. He got to Dupuy and told him to foreclose on the loan. No doubt they planned this all along to get me out of my place. What was I to do? I had to get money, but it slipped through my hands like water. This was in 1881, the year before my Alice was born.

What was I to do? I went down to Montgomery Street in San Francisco, where the bankers are, and sought Charles McLaughlin and asked to borrow the money. Now, McLaughlin and me agreed to a mortgage on the Vasco. But that fool lawyer Pringle had written the paper as if I had sold him
the land and I signed it all unknowing. So I filed a paper saying that I only mortgaged the land. But Judge Greene decided against me.

You must know that I still fight for my land. I sat in the court for days, and me I'm no young man anymore. One time I got strange-feeling. My breath don't come very well and I couldn't talk no more. But I will fight them until I got no more breath left, I tell you that for truth.

POSTSCRIPT

I have to report that in 1897 Mr. Peres petitioned the California Supreme Court for a new trial and was refused. In May of the following year I was saddened to read in the Oakland Tribune of Mr. Peres's death, at the age of 73.

For any who may wish to make the excursion, Mr. Peres's family plot is in that portion of Oakland's Mountain View Cemetery that is reserved for those of the Hebrew faith.

Those of us who practice the art of Clio do not indulge ourselves in speculation but, rather, we are seekers after truth. However, if I may inject my own opinion, I cannot help but think that Mr. Peres's demise was hastened by the realization that his long struggle to keep his ranch at the Vasco was finally over and that he had lost.
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RANCHO CANADA DE LOS VAQUEROS
(“VALLEY OF THE COWBOYS”), IN 1844.

To claim a grant of land from the Mexican government, the applicants had to file a diseño – a simple annotated map. Grantees Alviso, Higuera, and Miranda sold their interest in Los Vaqueros quite informally, and soon, several unwary buyers claimed interests in the grant totaling more than 200 percent. The competing claims were contested for many years and caused the ruin of several Vasco ranchers.
THE TALE OF MARIA MANUELLA ANGULO

From the top of the mound, the grandmother could just make out the waters of Kellogg Lake through the oaks.

It was hot, and the cloudless sky promised more of the same. A typical summer day in eastern Contra Costa County. The kids seemed contented enough, scrambling up the branch of a huge oak tree that had drooped near to the ground and jumping from the cleft into a pile of last year’s dead leaves.

“You sure this is the place? Seems different from when Auntie brought us. But that was years ago, I guess. Don’t remember that lake out there.”

“Sure I’m sure. You know how much time I’ve spent on this term paper? And I told you already, that’s a reservoir. See, there’s the dam.”

The granddaughter pulled a sheaf of papers from her backpack.

“Yeah. This is the place all right. Listen to this. It’s from a book by a couple of UC Berkeley profs: ‘…now grass covered and almost level with the ground; one part, that of the chimney and the walls adjoining it as pointed out by Silva who knew the building when standing, is about 30 inches high.’ Not much left now.”

“Nope. But this is where it began, I guess, from what Auntie told us and she got it from her father, who was Maria’s son.” The older woman checked the log carefully for ants. Finding none, she sat heavily.

“Mind if I tape this?” asked the granddaughter.

“OK with me. So what do you want to know?”

“Everything. Just start from the beginning.”

“Don’t have time for everything,” she laughed. “Let’s see now. Her name was Maria Maneulla Angulo.

You want me to spell that? Don’t know if she was Spanish or Mexican. And she lived here starting in about 1852, from what Auntie said. Right here in this adobe house.

Well that was just about the Gold Rush time but any smart businessman knew that there was more money in selling to the miners than looking for gold yourself. And that’s how it was with the Suñol brothers. I told you that Lorenzo, the older brother, and Juan were from Barcelona on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. They were very young when they came over to California, only about your age, but they saw how things were and got into the cattle business.

If you look around, this looks pretty barren don’t it? But this was a good place to be for a rancher. There’s San Francisco, just a day’s ride over to the east; and then there’s the gold-mining area just across the Central Valley. Plenty of opportunity to sell the cattle, do you see? In the early days, before they got established like, the ranchers would ride down to southern California or Mexico, buy cattle there and drive them up here to fatten before they’d sell them to slaughter houses.”

“That’s gross.”

“What? You think the beef just jumps between the hamburger buns? No. These guys weren’t adventurers like in the movies. Most of them wanted to make a fortune and go back to where they came from. It didn’t matter to them if they made it mining for gold or selling steaks.

Now, when the Suñols came out here to the Vasco – that’s what folk called this area – there wasn’t hardly anyone else out here. The whole valley and all the hills around were part of a grant from the Spanish government to just three settlers.”

“That’s the Mexican government, Grandma.”

“Who’s telling this story, Miss College Student? Now like I was saying, it seems like the Suñols just came out and squatted here. There was a lot of that going on at the time. The Mexican government had granted most of the best farming land to a few Mexican citizens and the new settlers weren’t happy about it. You’re going to ask about Indians, aren’t you? Well from what I was told, there were hardly any on the Vasco at the time.

So the Suñol brothers came out here and built this house out of adobe bricks dried in the sun. It had no real floor, just beaten clay, and only two rooms.
Now the brothers were down near Santa Barbara buying cattle when they met Maria. She was to be their housekeeper, to do the cooking and so on for them and their vaqueros, their cowboys.

It must have been a strange life for a young woman, living with a bunch of rough men out here in the middle of nowhere. Maria must have been something of a horsewoman because she traveled with the brothers when they went to buy and sell cattle and horses.

Auntie told a story of how the group of them rode off to John Bidwell’s ranch, the Spanish Ranch he called it, over near Sacramento. They bought a herd of 19 or 20 horses from Bidwell and turned around to head back to the Vasco. Now Maria never liked Lorenzo, and I guess this trip was the last straw. She told the brothers that she wanted to quit, but they offered her money and she said she’d stay on. What else could she do? An unmarried woman with no family like she was? Well now, at that point the older brother, that would be Lorenzo, he fell ill and they had to stop. Well, he got sicker and sicker, and while they were looking after him the horses all wandered away, back to Bidwell’s ranch.

Maria had a hard life out on the Vasco. And the company of no other women. They had a bit of a garden, down there, I guess, down by the creek. While the men were out on the range or driving cattle, she would do everything to keep the house and garden. They ate a lot of beef as you can imagine, cutting it up with an ax and roasting it over a fire or cooking it up as a stew in a great pot. Baking hot in the summer and cold and miserable in winter.

Now you know the way brothers are. These two didn’t always get along as well as they might. Juan was a bit of a lady’s man, you know. He liked company and good times, and only got on a horse when he couldn’t avoid it. Lorenzo was just the opposite and felt that his brother didn’t pull his weight around the ranch. He used to say that if it hadn’t been for his younger brother holding him back, he would have been worth $100,000.

And you might think that Maria had something to do with those two falling out, and perhaps she did. Two brothers out there in the boondocks with only this young woman for company. Well, you can imagine. But Auntie never said nothing about that.

Maria longed to get away from Lorenzo and was happy with the thought that she would be out of the adobe. Perhaps she also liked the idea of having Juan to herself. I couldn’t say. Perhaps during one of those long winter evenings out there on the Vasco he had told her that one day he would take her back to Spain with him.”

“Just a minute, Grandma. I thought Maria was, like, a housekeeper. Sounds like you’re saying that she and Juan were, like, a couple.”

“I’m only saying what Auntie told me. Sure when they started off she was their cook and so on, but later I kinda get the idea that there was something
going on. In fact… but wait up now. I can’t be
going running ahead on this. Now where was I?”
“The brothers weren’t getting along and…”
“Yeah. So things came to a head between those
two in the winter of 1856 and they had a falling
out. Lorenzo got real mad and told his brother that
he would not be his partner anymore. Soon after
this, it was one day in December, a man named
Jose Maria Redendo came to the adobe. Maria
knew him well, for he had come up regularly for a
couple of years to get cattle. Lorenzo would ride
off to cut out the cattle while Juan stayed in the
adobe and wrote out a bill of sale.

Now Redendo’s uncle was a butcher in Calaveritas,
and he was in debt to the Suñols and wanted to
pay them off by giving up his shop. Maria and Juan
jumped at the opportunity. They would run the shop
in Calaveras County and Lorenzo would supply
them with cattle from the ranch. Perhaps they also
saw trouble brewing with their neighbors, a group
of young, hot-tempered Basque ranchers that lo-
cals called the Bascos.

Like I said, plenty of people like the Suñols were
squattling on land in the early ’50s. But only a few
years later, as things became more settled, they
had to make things legal. When they found out
that the land that they had settled on was going
cheap at a Sheriff’s tax sale, the brothers bought it
and then re-sold half to Carlos Garat, one of the
Bascos who was still only a teenager. Can you
imagine that? At first it was fine between the neigh-
bors, but that didn’t last long. They were just kids,
you see. Proud and macho.”

“Hey kids can get along together, Grandma. OK, it
might have been just that the two just didn’t get
along. But think of it in another way. At first there
were few people and not that many cattle. As time
went on the range started filling up and getting
overgrazed. More cattle to feed, more competition
for land. Perhaps that was why.”

“Couldn’t say. Auntie never said that. But what
she did say was that soon after Maria and Juan
moved to Calaveritas in 1857 a man who deliv-
ered some cattle up to the butcher shop told Maria
about an incident between Lorenzo and Carlos
Garat that could have left one of them injured or
dead. Well this is how it happened. The Bascos
and the Suñols had some run-ins about horses. Like

After Juan Suñol deserted her, Maria Angulo
filed a suit to recover back wages that she
claimed the Suñol brothers had promised her.
Her claim was denied on appeal.
I said, it was all open range then. No fences. So everyone’s cattle just grazed everywhere. Well, these young men, boys really, they didn’t like one another’s horses or cattle on their land, even though it wasn’t fenced. They were forever warning each other off, the way boys do. Well one day Lozenzo saw that someone had cut the manes and tails off of all his horses. Now that was a cruel thing to do. And I suppose it would cost him money too. Don’t suppose anyone would buy a horse with no mane or tail. So Lorenzo gets all angry like and rides off to Garat’s adobe house all ready to kick some tail.”

“Grandma!”

“Well that’s how it was. And he gets there and Garat is cooking a beef on a skewer, all calm like nothing had happened. Well I suppose there was a bunch of shouting. And Lorenzo demanding why Garat messed with his horses and Garat telling him to get his stock off of the Basco land. And I guess it went on like this for a while until Garat pulls out this great long dangerous-looking knife and tells Lorenzo that what had happened was bad but what will happen will be worse. And I guess Lorenzo thinks better of it and rides off. And that’s all I know about that.”

“Well I know some more. Did I tell you I looked up some of the legal cases out here? It isn’t that hard to do legal research and it’s pretty exciting sometimes. But the handwriting! And you think modern people have bad writing?!”

“Sure they do.”

“That was a rhetorical question, Grandma.”

“Rhetorical, huh? No, Auntie didn’t say nothing about law suits. I don’t suppose those boys had time for that.”

“Hey, don’t give me a hard time, Grandma. And you’re wrong for once. Lorenzo had Carlos Garat arrested for injuring his horses. Garat got fined $200, but that was overturned on appeal. So much for frontier justice. These guys were suing each other right and left. There was more battling with lawyers than six-guns.”

“Well I don’t know nothing about that. All I know is what I heard. You wanna hear the rest or not?

So, Maria and Juan had moved up to the butcher shop, to Calaveritas in the Gold Country. One of Lorenzo’s vaqueros would run cattle up there once in a while. As best as I can make it out, Maria was living with Juan as a regular thing. A common-law marriage. She worked in the shop and took care of the house. The main street was all adobe houses. Kinda rough on the inside. Juan liked things to be nice so Maria sewed canvas for a ceiling and made the place homey-like.

Then Juan started talking about selling up and going back to Spain. Well, I suppose poor Maria thought that he’d marry her proper and it would all end like in the movies. He’d made promises to her you can be sure, the way men do. So he sold up the business and she packed up her few things in a trunk and got ready to leave. And then, I guess, he just left. Left her standing, and went off to Spain on his own, that sonaofa…

Don’t you look so shocked, Miss. She was treated real bad and I feel for her even though she was gone before ever I was born. Ever since Auntie told me I got this picture in my mind of her sitting there on her trunk, just waiting, til finally she gets the idea that he ain’t coming for her. But she didn’t just give up and go off crying. No, she set out to get back at them where it hurts.

These fashionable pieces of English tableware from the 1860s were found by archaeologists at the Basco Adobe, not far from the Adobe where Maria and the Suroil brothers lived. These and other dining and kitchen artifacts make up most of the remains from the early settlement of the Vasco. (Drawings by Nina Ilic)

I reckon she’d learned about lawyers from being around Juan for all those years. And even though she couldn’t write, she set to sue those brothers for the wages that they’d promised her. Now like I said, Maria’d been their housekeeper and worked hard too. They’d said they’d pay her $35 a month. And she wanted that money. Juan had gone to Spain so Lorenzo got hauled up in front of the judge and
stood there and called Maria a liar, that she’d never done nothing for him, he said. That he’d never said he’d pay her. That he didn’t know nothing about it. And that he wasn’t Juan’s business partner. Can you imagine the nerve of the man?

Well Maria got a bunch of witnesses who said that she was the housekeeper and the judge awarded her the money. You can bet she was happy. But Lorenzo appealed saying that Maria was Juan’s wife and that she’d only done what a wife should do for her husband and that wives don’t get paid for that. Well now, I ask you, who was the judge? And who were the lawyers? And the jury? Men. All men. So you know for yourself what they think of a wife who expected to get paid.”
“But she wasn’t his wife, was she Grandma? At least, not in the beginning. I don’t get it. Just ’cause she starts to live with the guy, suddenly she’s not entitled to what he’d promised her? That isn’t right.”
“You should change your major to pre-law, Maria.”
“Maybe I’ll do just that.”

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**POSTSCRIPT**

A pile of melted adobe covered with grass and star thistle, the Suñol Adobe isn’t much to look at. But if an archaeologist could perform her own type of surgery here with trowel and shovel, sifting the light soil, then its whole tale would come to light. The pieces of plates and cups that Maria Manuella Angulo bought and kept clean. Bones from countless meals that she cooked for the vaqueros. Tools that she used around the kitchen. Clothing that she sewed in the evening, sitting by the door before the sunset.

Maria’s world was full of small mundane objects. Yet, by some stroke of irony, it is these bits and pieces of everyday life and not the house itself that have survived to speak to us most eloquently about the people who lived at the Suñol Adobe.
FERMIN VALENZUELA, 1871-1939

Of Californio and Mexican-Indian heritage, “Frank” Valenzuela was born on the Vasco, and grew up on a ranch at the south end of Kellogg Creek Valley. His skill as a vaquero and teamster, and his gentle way with horses and children, earned Frank the respect of his neighbors. (Courtesy of Frank Silva.)
THE TALE OF FERMIN VALENZUELA

I’ve been hooked on the Wild West ever since Uncle Jimmy gave me the book about “Buffalo Bill” Cody and his Wild West Show.

On the cover was a colored picture of the Colonel himself with his long hair, fringed jacket, and broad brimmed hat. In the background men wrestled the reins of out-of-control wagons while leveling their long rifles at bare-chested Indians whose head dresses trailed behind them, presumably from the speed at which they were riding. I remember that the drawings were too small to make out the expressions on the faces of the men.

Later, as an eager sophomore at Cal, I fancied that I would write the “real” history of the west as a counterpoint to the pap that Hollywood was just beginning to churn out, at first in silent pictures and later punctuated by the bang of real, simulated gunfire. In retrospect, I suppose that Professor Hendry’s suggestion that I go out to Livermore if I wanted to find some real cowboys to talk to, was more of a dismissal than a serious suggestion; nonetheless, he was good enough to give me an introduction to one of his correspondents.

And so it was, in the Fall quarter of 1935 – when the rest of the country was mired in the Great Depression and wondering how it would pay the rent – that I subjected this rather taciturn man, the local postmaster, to an earnest examination into what must have seemed one mighty irrelevant topic.

At first, I peppered him with questions designed, in my boyish arrogance, to elicit praise of the noble soul of the Western Cowboy. But he would have none of it, and answered only in monosyllables. His wandering eyes told me that he was losing interest and was probably asking himself how he could terminate this absurd interview. In desperation I blurted out a question rephrased only slightly from an exam that I had taken only the previous week:

“Which historic figure best captures the spirit of the American Cowboy?”

At first he seemed ready to make another terse response on the order of ‘Oh, I don’t know.’ But he pulled himself back, sat thoughtfully for a few moments, and answered in this way:

“I suppose, young man, that you’re expecting me to say Buffalo Bill or some such nonsense.” I moved uneasily in my chair, embarrassed now by the name of my boyhood idol.

“Well I’m going to surprise you.” He already had, since this was the longest speech that I’d had from him all afternoon. “Ever heard of Fermin Valenzuela?”

“Oh, no. A Mexican was he? What did he do?”

“Do? Why nothing much. And he’s not Mexican; he has deeper roots in this part of the State than you or I, young man, unless you’re part Indian, which I doubt.” I conceded that this was not the case and was, I admit, privately offended by the suggestion.

“Where do I start? Fermin, or Frank as we say, he calls himself an Indian. Yeah, from his dad’s side. He’s a vaquero and a teamster, and I’ve known him and his family all my life. One of the best men with horses that was ever up here, though he must be nearly 70 now. Lives up on the Vasco, over between here and Brentwood. Family’s been in that country since before there was a State of California.

Frank’s dad came up from Los Angeles in the 1850s, it must have been, when the town was just a few ‘dobe houses. His mother, Dora, was from Mexico. There was a mess of kids in the family and they had 80 acres up there in the Black Hills at the head of the Tassajara Valley. I guess they got by OK, running a few head of cattle and Spanish horses, and raising sheep when the wool prices were high.

Am I boring you, young man, talking about prices? That’s what ranching is all about. You think that the rancher up there doesn’t know what’s going on in the commodity market? He’s got to know if wheat will sell high or low this year or if he should go more into wool or hogs. And he’d better be right, too.
Fermin spent more time around horses than people when he was growing up. He’s one of those cowboys who could snag a steer with his riata and follow it at full gallop down a steep hill like they have out on the Vasco. You can’t know how dangerous that is. The riata’s wrapped around the horn of your saddle and if the steer makes a bad turn it can pull you straight off the horse’s back. But Fermin has a way with horses and he’s respected for it. Riding and as a teamster, both. Ask him about how he handles a 32-horse team, ask him that when you see him.”

This comment startled me, since I’d imagined that such a legendary figure would surely be unapproachable – if not dead. But I had no time to inquire, as my informant continued his story without a break.

“He has had a life. And he’s no angel, I can tell you. Used to drink a lot when he was younger, y’know. Go into town on a Saturday, tie one on, and not roll back home until Monday. And he wasn’t unusual in that. Well as I was saying, his dad had a ranch up there but when he died, in about 1892, they owed money on the mortgage and they soon lost the place. That was another depression, in the ‘90s. Prices were low for the rancher and there was no getting credit no matter how hard he worked and all his family. That was bad for the

*Angela and John Bonfante, with children Albert, Mary, and Frances (l to r). The Bonfante family often hired Fermin Valenzuela to repair equipment in their blacksmith shop. (Courtesy of Mary Bonfante Vallerga and Frances Bonfante Cabral.)*
Valenzuelas. They'd been landowners and now they were out. And that's why he did it, I guess. Got in trouble for cattle rustling, that is.

I see that I got your attention now, young man. But you don't ever want to mention this to Frank, if you get to see him. You know what I mean. But I don't suppose that his story's too different from a lot of guys. Ordinary working stiffs who saw their family run into hard times and let themselves get talked into doing something dumb. Well this is how it happened as Frank told it to me.

It was early in 1897, March. Frank's family was in a bad way as I told you. Well, Aldopho Silva, a vaquero up there, he starts badgering Fermin telling him how he can make some easy money rustling some of Christiansen's cattle and how he's got a buyer in Tony Correa who had a reputation up there of being a shady character. Young Frank, he'd be about 25 then, puts him off and puts him off, but eventually says he'll go along with it. They reckon that they can steal those cattle and hide them up in the hills. And this they do. But now it starts to go bad. Correa doesn't want to buy the cattle and neither does anyone else. Then the Sheriff's men track down the cattle and catch the rustlers red handed.

Frank was so humiliated. He didn't wait to get a lawyer, he just spilled the whole story to the judge. And for that they gave him 5 months in the County Jail. But Silva had walked that road before. He had a jury trial and got himself acquitted. Lawyers! Well, I'll say no more on that subject.”

At this point my now talkative friend paused in his narrative. Considering his last remark, I hoped that his silence was not a prelude to the usual question about my plans after graduation. Or that I could lie successfully.

Although I was unsure of what I would find, I was determined to track down this legendary figure. The Postmaster, who was rather protective of his cowboy friend, was now convinced of my worthiness, and agreed to contact Mr. Valenzuela and act as intermediary. I returned to Berkeley and the entire issue went out of my head until nearly a month later when a letter arrived, forwarded to my address in Barrington Hall from my parents' house in the City. A time and place had been set for the meeting - the following Sunday at a ranch out on the Vasco.

It was a rough drive in the Postmaster's old Ford. More than once I had to get out and push the vehicle, which was mercifully light in weight, as the wheels spun vainly, slinging mud all over my clothes and face. The green hills were scored with brown frond-like gullies and the creek banks unnaturally steep where the fast-moving water had gouged its path. Nearly a century of grazing and overgrazing had transformed the land.

"Didn't you say he'd retired to Livermore?" I asked with some annoyance.

"True enough. He just comes out here for a kind of vacation. These old boys just can't stop working, y'know." I said that I couldn't imagine what he meant.

The Bonfante Ranch was (and still is, as far as I know) tucked into the side of the hills overlooking Kellogg Creek, about half way between Livermore and Brentwood. The place was dominated by a great two-story barn. Around it, a few low wooden buildings and corrals crouched like medieval hovels about a cathedral. The farmyard was clean and practical. The stream that flowed close by was lined with rock to check the erosion that had scarred the surrounding hillsides.

At the ranch-house door, my Postmaster was warmly greeted by a diminutive lady, evidently Mrs. Bonfante. Although my knowledge of Italian is limited to subjects gustatory, I gathered that the object of our search was to be found in the rough lean-to that stood behind the orchard. And there we went.

The building was a blacksmith's shop, and something of a novelty to me, a San Franciscan of the mid-20th century. The side that we approached was open to the air, the roof supported by a series of wooden posts. There was a central brick and stone platform that even I could recognize as the forge where the blacksmith would heat his iron. At one end was suspended a great bellows, its nose
Among the artifacts in John Bonfante's blacksmith shop was a collection of bottles. Like many other Italian-Americans on the Vasco, John made his own grappa—a strong liquor. (Photograph by Grace Ziesing)

plugged into the stonework, ready to deliver the blast of air that kept the fire hot and the metal malleable enough to work.

Unwilling to interrupt and somewhat intrigued by the sight of this ancient craft, we watched the smith as he selected a piece of round iron from a pile, thrust it into the forge. He pulled twice on a rope above his head and the bulk of the bellows expanded. As the air bag fell, a bright glow came from the forge. Soon, the smith withdrew the piece of white hot metal from the fire with a pair of long-handled tongs and, in an easy motion, hooked it over the anvil’s horn and tapped it lightly with a heavy hammer to form a perfect circle. Now, at the sight of my Postmaster, the man grinned shyly and, plunging the link into a barrel of water, threw his tools on his work bench.

Mr. Valenzuela was a tall man, perhaps six feet in height, and lean. I will admit that I was a little disappointed in his appearance, expecting if not flowing hair in the Buffalo Bill mode, at least some distinguishing feature. He wore a small black mustache and had a remarkably ruddy complexion. Although he was apparently in his sixties, he had the vigor and appearance of a much younger man.

The introductions were made, my Postmaster presenting me as a university student doing research. At this, Mr. Valenzuela nodded somberly as if to say that any kind of odd inquiry might be expected from such a one. We withdrew to a corner of the hut where a table and some unsteady chairs served as the smith’s parlor and luncheon room. The floor was just dirt, but paved with tiny pieces of black slag, waste from the forge. From the collection of empty wine bottles piled in the corner, I had the impression that Mr. Valenzuela had spent many an enjoyable evening out here. Seeing my sideways glance, my Postmaster pointed out that like other ranchers on the Vasco, Mr. Bonfante made wine and grappa—a strong Italian liquor—and stored the bottles here to reuse time and again. “He just does it to confuse those archaeologists in the future. Eh, Frank?” The man smiled, but I doubt that he thought anyone would have an interest in the few poor items that represent the life of a cowboy.
At first the two spoke of mutual friends and that topic of conversation of perpetual interest to both farmers and the English: the weather. I saw that my Postmaster was painlessly bringing the subject around to the life of the cowboy from one season to the next. It occurred to me that Mr. Valenzuela had probably never read a book in his life. For all his ruddy appearance, Mr. Valenzuela spoke without an accent. At first he seemed uncomfortable talking about himself and addressed himself only to my Postmaster.

“So I was telling the boy here that you’d pretty much retired now.”

“Yes. Pretty much.”

“But you’re still keeping your hand in.”

“Oh, yeah. Just a habit I guess. They still got a few things for an old guy to do.”

“Who you working for these days, Fermin? The boy here wants to know what a guy like you does all year.”

“Here and there, like always. Bonfante, Crosslin, and Bordes mostly.” Mr. Valenzuela picked up a nail from the ground and casually began to clean his nails with it, and did not look up as he spoke.

“What you gotta understand is that there’s always something to do on a ranch. Stock to check on. Something to fix. But some times of year there’s more than at others. So a guy like me had better be able to do a bunch of different jobs or else he’s gonna find himself out of work in the winter. Right now there’s stuff to fix. See that pile of iron? That’s my working stock. I’ll take a piece out of there and make it into something else, see? When you use horses like we do up here there’s always some piece of gear that takes fixing. Chains break. A bolt shears off and you have to make a new one. That kind of thing. You know how to make a bolt out of a piece of round stock? I guess not. And a good thing too, otherwise you’d be after my job.” He looked up and grinned at the Postmaster. “And harness wears out too,” he continued. “Old George Davis comes around with his leather tree and fixes that for the different ranchers.”

“You mean to tell me that there’s enough work for a guy to just fix harnesses around here? I thought that they’d be using modern machines like tractors by now.” Mr. Valenzuela sniffed and shook his head at me with an expression not of annoyance but pity at my lack of practical education.

“Tractors? Sure there’s a use for them, I guess, if a guy knows how to run them and fix them. Down there in the valley where it’s flat ground, they run fine. But listen. I’ll tell you about what we use up here on the hills and that’s horses. You know that up here they harvest wheat and barley and hay. That’s what they’ve been doing for as long as I remember. When I was a boy there was real money in them grain crops. Then they started bringing it in from foreign countries and the prices went up and down every year and the farmer couldn’t tell what was going to happen. Just about the time when my Dad passed over, over 40 years ago I’m talking, the wheat prices went up and up for a couple of years and they all started planting. Wheat, wheat, wheat; that’s all there was. All over this country and places where no one planted before or since. Then there was too much and the prices dropped like a rock, and they had to get into something else.

Well, when the prices are high enough they’ll still plant the hills. And that has to get harvested. And that takes horses and always has because of how steep the hills are out here on the Vasco. Even if these old ranchers had the money for tractors – which they don’t – a tractor can’t make a tight turn. He’ll just flip over. But a team. That’s different. If you’ve got a teamster in the seat he’ll get them to do what’s needed. You see how steep these hills are. You need a big team to pull the harvester. I’ve run 32-horse teams up here. 18 or 20 in a string ain’t so unusual.”

“Are you serious? Thirty-two horses? How did you do it?”

“Oh, it ain’t so hard – if you’ve got three hands, four is good too.” He grinned and winked at my Postmaster.

“Listen. When you drive a team you gotta let every horse know that you’re in charge. So you gotta have all the reins in your hands. But most of all you gotta guide the wheel horses. The others will follow them, you see. What I do is this. I’ll tie up the reins from those wheel horses back under the seat, you see. And then use my feet. If I push
hard, they turn hard. And then holler at ‘em. Tell ‘em what to do. ’

“The boy thinks you’re exaggerating” said my Postmaster. “Why don’t you show him.” In fact, I had no such feeling, and I suspected that this was merely a ploy to get Fermin to display his talents. With a sly smile on his face, the teamster led us out of the blacksmith shop.

“We’ll go over to the stala” he said quietly. More Italian; this time from an Indian.

In the barn several large horses were facing into their stall, standing quietly.

“This is the team. Now, you back ‘em up,” ordered Fermin. I approached the first animal and yanked on his halter. The horse tugged back, nearly jerking me off my feet but did not move. Fermin grinned and motioned me to step aside, and spoke with a commanding voice.

“Back boys. Back boys.” The animals obediently obliged, backing up out of their stall with barely a touch from their master.

“None better with horses, as I’ve always said” remarked my Postmaster.

“I remember one time – don’t know why this is stuck in my mind – but this one time Frank was loading hay off of a six-horse team onto a railroad car down in Livermore. That team started to back up and the wagon started to jackknife. You never even touched the lines, Frank. Just yelled with that voice of yours and snapped your old whip whip in the air and they came right back to where they was. I remember that all right. Tell him about harvesting, Frank.”

“Yes. I’d like to know all about it, Mr. Valenzuela. Who do you work for? Where do you live in the season? Anything you want to tell.”

“Well, I work most for Mr. Bordes, Brother Bordes he’s called. When I started out with him I was getting one dollar a day and board. And there’s fifty cents if the missus does your wash. Bordes got a bunkhouse like every rancher and we’d live in the bunkhouse, the hands that is. Brother had the only harvester around here so me and the team would go round from ranch to ranch harvesting at so-much an acre or so-much a ton. We start late, about ten in the morning, after the dew’s burned off. You can’t harvest wet grain, y’know.

Now, there’s five or six guys to run a harvester: There’s the teamster; he drives the team. I told you about that. There ain’t too many long-line teamsters around here. Fred Mouterot and a couple of others. Then I guess there’s the headtender; he watches the thresher. And the separator man who make sure that the grain separates from the chaff. And then I guess there’s the guy who jiggles the sacks to make sure that they’re full; he’s the jigger.

Sometimes I work on the hay-baling crew and then we get paid by the ton. The season’s short, just a couple of months in early summer, so we spend the whole day in the fields. Eat out there. Just come back to sleep.”

The interview was now going so well that I ventured a question of my own. “Did you ever see the Livermore Rodeo, Mr. Valenzuela?”

“Well, no. Though there’s a few men round here who won money prizes there. Not to offend, y’know, but that’s just a show. Out here rodeo’s a regular round-up. That’s when...”

“Yes, I know.” I interrupted, determined to show off my knowledge. “You go out and get all the cattle together from off of the range and separate them by their owners and brand them, right?”

“Yeah. That’s part of it,” he replied patiently. “And you might horn ‘em, too. That’s when you saw off the horns so that they don’t hurt each other when they get trucked off to the City. And you cut off other things too. Turn the young bulls into steers. Castrate ‘em. And have a barbecue. Boy, if you’ve never tasted mountain oysters... barbecued or fried with some garlic and onion. That’s good food!”

“Mountain oysters? You mean to say you eat the...?”

“Anything else you wanna know, young man?” put in my Postmaster. “Perhaps something about breaking horses? That shouldn’t give offense.”

“Well, y’know” said Mr. Valenzuela, “there’s two ways of making a riding horse. There’s training and there’s breaking. Now the horse don’t like feeling a weight on his back. That’s natural. So you do
it gradual. You start off by putting on a light saddle. Then, when he’s used to that, you add some sand bags. And pretty soon he’ll take a man. I won’t say he’ll like it, but if you have patience it’ll come out right. But if you’re out to break a horse you just get on him and stay on until he’s all kicked out. I done that and I can tell you one thing: the dirt don’t taste so good. And a guy can get hurt pretty bad. When I was a kid you couldn’t get down into Livermore if you got sick or hurt. You’d have to take care of it up here.

Seems to me that when I was a kid there was this old, old lady, Tomas Robles’s mother, she was. They lived out by us in the Black Hill, the Robles did. Well, Robles was a little guy, a Yaqui Indian from Mexico, so I guess his mom she was an Indian too. Well the old lady, was a healer. She knew the ways of making potions out of herbs and such, and all about babies too. Manuella, that was her name. I remember it now. Us kids was a bit afraid of her, the way kids are. But everyone round here knew her, the healer. Did I tell you that I’m Indian? Through my dad, that is.

In the fall of 1939, not long after I had begun studying for my law degree, I picked up a letter from my mailbox in the co-op. In his old-fashioned way of preparing the reader for bad news, my Postmaster had affixed the stamp upside-down. Mr. Valenzuela, he wrote, was dead and the funeral was over and done.

I hope that the minister’s eulogy had something authentic to say about the old man’s life, but it seems unlikely. I get the feeling that most people think of the Cowboy as I used to – a dynamic figure in leather fringes. I remember Frank Valenzuela as a shy man who, nevertheless, could command a team of horses with a couple of words. My Postmaster was surely right when he threw down my boyish hero for this ruddy-faced man whose home was the bunkhouse, and whose workplace was the wheatfield and the forge.

A long peen hammer. Found by archaeologists in the Bonfante blacksmith shop, this tool may have been used by Fermin Valenzuela himself. (Drawing by A. Richard Wolter)
MARY “MINNIE” BARNES BORDES, 1857-1924

The daughter of a strict Irish household, Minnie shocked her friends by “hitching on” to a local French rancher. Three of her twelve children died in childhood. Minnie stayed on the Vasco all her adult life. (Courtesy of Frank Silva.)
THE TALE OF MINNIE BARNES BORDES

Livermore, California
28 January 1997

My Dearest Niece (don’t dare show this to your sister!)
It was wonderful to see you all at Thanksgiving. As promised, I have enclosed photocopies of the diary pages of our relative MB. Sorry to relate, this seems to be all there is, although I have some of her letters that you could see if you wish. I’ve done my best to put the pages in date order so you can follow the “action” and I’ve added some comments of my own. Hope that you can read my scrawl; my writing is no better than Minnie’s. The first few pages aren’t dated, but she writes about an earthquake in the beginning so I think it’s probably 1868. The best I can tell, she was born on January 28th in 1857, which would make today her 140th had she lived (you can laugh now). Please return the photographs as soon as you’re done with them, for I don’t like to have them out of my hands. My love to your mother and to yourself.
— Your doting Uncle.

________________________________________

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA
SPRING 1868

Friday
My Dear Diary, Such a commotion. early today we had a earthquake and Mother and everyone was so put out by it that I could not get to write until now which is quite late.

Sunday
My Dear D, We are back in our house now after such a [illegible word]. mother says I should write down things so that I’ll not forget them. Things were quite a wreck here and mother was most upset and said that she would not live in Frisco anymore. In the earthquake we could not get out of the house so Mother lowered Annie and the little ones on a rope out of the window. The house shook a lot and things went everywhere. Father says the people down here on the flats got it worse that the rich people up on Rincon Hill.

Monday
My Dear D, Yesterday Father took Annie and me to see the gasworks where he works. there is a pipe that goes from the gasworks to the shore and it spills out the black tar that they make at the gasworks. father says that there is nothing like that in Ireland and Mother said that children should not live here but I think it’s allright.

________________________________________

Here’s a little comment from me. The Barnes family lived south of Market, down on Minna Street, in a grim industrial area of foundries and factories. The neighborhood was built on reclaimed land, filled with sand and abandoned ships from the Gold Rush. It must have shook like jello during the quake.

________________________________________

BARNES RANCH, BYRON, CALIFORNIA

3 Nov ’69
My Dear, Rain today. this place is all right except when it rains a lot and we can’t go nowhere. I help Mother with the little ones and Father is gone into Livermore.

4 Nov
More rain. EG came visiting.

5 Nov
My Dear, Today Mr. Allen came and Father yelled at him and said that he was a crook. and Mother took us into the house. And I set a dozen duck eggs out under the broody hen and mother says that I may have the chicks.

________________________________________

In 1869, Minnie’s parents moved the family from their cramped quarters in San Francisco onto the ranch. Mrs. Barnes had six daughters to take care of, from infant Charlotte to 12-year-old Minnie. The family had
Dad says if you want a few dollars to let us know and he will sell the skins and a day of the hens, and send you the money. I think you will see him down the before long or maybe my self you must not send us five cents worth of anything for we are doing very well, if you want any eggs or butter or a little of the new tea just let us know, the Foreman's name is Silvean Bordes, and I think I will hitch on to him.

Letter from Minnie Barnes to her mother, Anne, written 8 February 1878. Anne Barnes was away from the ranch, staying with her young daughter, Annie, who died in the hospital later that year. This was a period of high emotion for Minnie, with the tragedy of her sister’s death made bearable by meeting her future husband, Sylvain Bordes. (Courtesy of Frank Silva.)

“bought” the ranch from a family friend, John Allen. A family story tells that when Mr. Barnes discovered that the land was not really Allen’s to sell, he shot his one-time friend, wounding him in the arm.

It seems that what Allen had actually sold him was a possessory claim – the right to homestead the land after it had been surveyed by the US Government.

8 January 1878
In only a month I’ll reach the ripe old age of 21. It’s a good age, I suppose, but old all the same. Alice goes on about how I’ll never be married now but that’s so much rot. Mother says that the other girls are too forward, meaning that they marry young. I know that it is evil to think it but since Mother has gone to Oakland to take care of poor Annie we’ve had some high times here such as she would not allow.

Wednesday last there was AL and BG here and we got to laughing so that I went off of the chair and put my arm through the window. And then we fell to laughing even more. DB came by with a piece of EB’s wedding cake.

9 January 1878, Monday
That much for dreaming of a husband. Last night I put the cake under my pillow – and dreamt of EB of all people, and I’ve been thinking of another recently. The hens lay well and I get 42-44 of eggs each day. Both milch cows are flowing and we shall soon be awash in butter.

10 January ’78
Since Mother has been away Mr. Peres’ foreman has been right kind to us in a funny way. Alice says as how he comes round only to see me. Father don’t seem to notice too much but there are those as do and I shall write no more on that. He is a Frenchman by the name of Silvean Bordes and we get along splendid. Today we sat in the kitchen and had tea and Charlotte hid and listened and made fun of his way of talking after he had gone.
14 January
Sylvie Bordes came again and gave Father a load of sheep as had died that our hired man can skin and get 35 cents the each. It was right generous of him Father said. We talked some and I slipped and fell into the manger. I’m so sure footed!

He brought along 17 pounds of tea for us and four bits worth of the choicest candy. He said as how he’d bought it in Livermore thinking that he was buying coal oil for Mr. Peres. I don’t see how that happened and I think that he may have been just saying it to give us the present. He is awful sweet and Alice says that he has surely set his cap at me.

Sunday March 10
A terrible thing. Mr. Paris and Sylvie were out on horseback looking for horses and they came to a big ravine and they went to cross it and Sylvie went first and when he was going down his saddle turned and the horse hit him with one foot on the breast and on the nose and struck him on the back of the hand and peeled the flesh off. So I came near to losing my man. Ella Nick is trying her best to catch him but it is no go for her. He will not be coaxed by her. He laughs and tells me everything she says. He says she talks too much for him.

May 2nd
Dad is so busy cutting hay. He got the lend of a mowing machine from Johnson Righter for a couple of weeks. He has Sam Nickerson helping him. Silvean told him he would give him an old horse rake. Dad told Sylvie that he was going to made us girls help him rake the hay on Monday. Sylvian didn’t like the thought of that so came Monday morning and raked all the hay Dad had cut in five days. The flowers in my boxes do fine but when I use the well water they die so it’s water from the rain barrel for them.

Dec 3 ’78
There was a bad letter from Hattie Righter. She means to persuade me not to marry Sylvie but her reasons are so hollow saying as how Sylvie does not speak well and how no one will receive us at home if we marry. As if I would ever be ashamed of him. She just doesn’t like foreign born people which is queer since so many are here, like my own dear Mother and Dad.

There are many French people on the Vasco and some think that they are too close with each other and don’t like how they speak a language you can’t understand. Mr. Paris is a Frenchman and a Jew but has always been a friend to us. Hattie means to be a friend I know but it sits bad with me that she says such things about Sylvie. As if her being from Illinois makes her a better Christian.

The oldtimers always say that everyone got along just fine out on the Vasco and maybe that’s right. There were people from all over North America and Europe. There was nothing unusual about a rancher who might not be able to read and write too well, being able to hold his own in three or four languages. You know that the earliest settlers were Mexican and Span- ish; later came the Basques – that’s where “Vasco Road” comes from – and the French. Later there were Italian and Portuguese families, like the Fragulias and the Roses, whose descendants are still in the area.

It’s no news to you that Minnie and Sylvain were married in spite of Hattie Righter’s advice! It seems that Sylvain’s boss, Mr. Peres, gave the couple a ranch out on the Vasco as a wedding present but they lost it in a court case since it turns out that Peres didn’t own it in the first place!! I shouldn’t joke as I’m sure that it was a great shock to them.

THE BORDES RANCH, LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA

2 June 1880 early morning time
The Orlets arrive today for the summer and that will be 7 more what with Ernestine and the children. Sylvain is very fond of the aunt and I had not the heart to tell him the extra work it will put me to. Thank God Alice is here to help with the baby.
house, as well as Sylvain. I would rather it were just us but there would be no making do without the money we get from them. With five men I have not a minute all day. The well is low and my garden patch is dry. The garlic and herbs would not grow except for the kitchen water. The wind has blown very hard for three days now, so I guess when it stops I will have no wool on the top of my head.

December 1897
Oh my poor Annie. I only wish her back.

I wasn't sure what this meant at first. However, I found a newspaper clipping that tells how Minnie's eldest daughter eloped with the family's hired hand when she was only 14 (I think she was really 15, but then I suppose the scandal mongers' craft hasn't changed much.)

16 March 1904
Wet and windy today. Jacky drove the girls over the hill to school. The creek crossing is near washed out. They went through the Fragilia Place and saw Mrs. F. who speaks little English and gets by talking through her daughter Rosie. The girls have been collecting autographs in their little books. Here's what Rose put in Alice's book:

There is a golden cord
which binds two hearts together.
And if that cord is never broken
you and I are friends for ever.

Sunday June 1918
A glorious day. I can almost forget what is going on in France. The hills are still green although it is already June. Tomorrow is the birthday but today all of us rode along the ridge over to the swimming hole by Cabral's sheep camp.

Since you have never been out to the old place, I imagine that the idea of a swimming hole up on the ridge sounds rather strange. Perhaps I'll take you up there some time; you'd never find it on your own.
There’s a gully that runs down the side of the hill. One side is a steep sandstone cliff that wind and water have carved into shallow caves. On the top of the cliff, nature has formed a series of depressions in the stone. In winter, these pools fill with rain and overflow in a gentle stream down the cliff, continually purifying the water. It’s a beautiful place.

There’s still some left of what Minnie called “Cabral’s sheep camp” but you have to look for it. I should tell you that Frank Cabral is a classic American success story. They say he stowed away on a ship from the Azores at the age of 9 and by 1910 he was one of the most successful sheep ranchers in this part of the state.

You know that there’s no wood to make fences up there on the Vasco so Cabral used the canyon itself as his corral. He fenced off the top with hog wire and rocks, drove the sheep in from the bottom, and closed it up. Pretty smart I’d say. The wire and the stacked stone fences are still there though I don’t suppose that anyone but me and you know what they are. His shepherders lived in the caves or in a shack built among the rocks on the other side of the corral.

I went up there years ago and found that someone had carved “Frank” into one of the rocks, and the “N” was backwards. It turns out that although Frank Cabral was very successful, he was illiterate.

Minnie Barnes Bordes died in 1924, outliving her “Sylvie” by 13 years. The Bordes name was borne by her nine surviving children and is still known and respected on the Vasco.

Graffiti etched into the rocks at Cabral’s sheep camp. Stockton’s sizable Portuguese-American population would swell with ranchers and sheepmen who came to celebrate traditional holidays, to find work, and just to “blow off steam.”
THE VASCO ADOBE

Built in the 1850s by a group of Basque cattle ranchers, the Vasco Adobe was used for about 60 years before it disintegrated into a pile of adobe “melt.” The rectangular adobe building was attached to a small kitchen that boasted a huge stone chimney which may have been used to smoke meat. By the 1870s, the Basques’ traditional domed bread oven had been dismantled. (Courtesy of Frank Silva.)
THE TALE OF THE VASCO ADOBE
An Archaeologist’s Journal

July 25, 1994
Adrian P. called me on the cell phone out at the Oakland site today to tell me that I’m going to direct this season’s field work at Los Vaqueros! One of the sites is an adobe that we have to find first—it is one of the earliest buildings out there, built before the place became tenant farms. This is really exciting, but kind of terrifying too. He says we will begin within the week and that I need to rent a van big enough to carry a crew of five plus equipment.

August 1, 1994
Rendezvous with Adrian at the Alameda County line on Vasco Road. This landscape is beautiful and unexpected. As soon as you exit I-580 at Livermore and start climbing into the hills you feel like you’ve traveled hundreds of miles away from the city and suburbs. Ramshackle barbed-wire fences line the roadway, the yellow grass on the bare hills rustles in the wind, cattle graze here and there, and a few long dirt driveways lead to clusters of farm buildings. It is a cool morning, but I can tell how hot it’s going to get out here. Must remember to bring lots of water and provide shade for crew.

We caravan over to the Starr Ranch to look for signs of the old Adobe. We poke around the ranch complex and find a few walls built of adobe bricks, but they look recent. So, keeping in mind Hendry and Bowman’s description of the adobe from their 1940 manuscript, we fan out across the pasture toward the northwest, trying to stay within 100 feet or so of Kellogg Creek. It is so dry here that we can see the ground pretty well despite the tall grass; the creek has no water in it. I’m not entirely sure what we are looking for—a mound, rocks, artifacts?—but any kind of anomaly will do, I suppose. The valley floor is flat as a pancake, so anomalies should be obvious.

Kicking aside dry grass I spot a small rock with two shallow mortar holes in it—it’s sitting right on the surface and obviously has been brought here recently. Adrian is uninterested. Coming up to a barbed-wire fence, I see that Adrian has climbed over it. He calls me over to investigate a mound he has spotted. Looking closer, we discern a pile of stones and even a brick or two. This could very well be what we are looking for. We decide to clear the area with a backhoe to make sure.

Spot two rattlesnakes over the course of the day—this was definitely not something I had to contend with back East. Another adventure. I decide to find the nearest hospital on my way home today and inquire about proper rattlesnake-bite protocol.

August 2, 1994
Meet with Karana H.-D. (our oral historian) and Paul F. (a former tenant at Los Vaqueros) at the gate to Starr Ranch. We hope Mr. F. can remember where the Adobe was since it was still standing when he was living in these parts. Mr. F. is a quiet man and he sounds a little wistful as he comments on how much things have changed. He provides us with a powerful clue, though. He says the Adobe was made of “flat rocks—shale rocks” with adobe mortar. He thinks our pile might be the place.

August 3, 1994
Adrian has been working with the backhoe to expose the ground around the mound of rocks we found. He keeps turning up 19th-century artifacts and has also found a well shaft. Confidence that we have found the site of the Adobe is growing—we decide to commit an entire crew to the site.

August 10, 1994
We’re beginning to get somewhere today. Adrian and Mike S. have uncovered a fragment of what looks to be a stone pavement near the mound of rocks. The pavement is composed of large tabular stones, each of which is up to 2 feet across. Looks like local sandstone. We establish a trench that will go from this surface right through the mound. As Anmarie M. excavates this trench, she finds that
After many days of work, archaeologists uncovered the remains of the Vasco Adobe. This shot was taken while suspended 40 feet above the site on a “Uni-Lift.” The Adobe’s rectangular foundation can be seen toward the rear. Attached to the curved wall of the massive chimney is the base of the Basque ranchers’ D-shaped bread oven, which can be seen at the lower left. (Photo by Mike Stoyka)

hidden in our “pile” of rocks is a very nicely constructed stacked-stone wall!
Mike M. has been uncovering bits of adobe brick as he clears to the north of Anmarie’s trench. These bricks have definitely been fired as they have nice sharp edges and range in color from light red to black. We can see impressions of straw in them.

A preliminary observation: all artifacts uncovered so far appear to date to the 19th century.

August 15, 1994
Hot weather is forecast for today (99 degrees in Livermore). Anmarie M. continues her trench, with the help of Mike S. Other crew work on exposing more of the flagstone pavement. We have found a pocket of whole liquor bottles in a deposit up to 8 inches thick – perhaps this is alluvium and there was a sizable flood that deposited soil and bottles together. The bottles are consistently lying on their sides and are not directly on the stone surface, but are sitting on the soil that covers the surface. They aren’t obviously 20th-century bottles (there are no automatic bottle machine marks on them), but they are probably not much earlier than 1900.
August 17, 1994
We are setting up for a day of drawing. Mike M. is preparing a plan to show the extent of the rock rubble that makes up our “mound” and the outline of the stacked-stone wall as we have defined it. This wall now appears to form a distinct semi-circle about 10 feet across. This structure and a rectangular appendage on the back of it (where we keep finding fired adobe bricks) are still a bit of a mystery.

August 18, 1994
Drawing is progressing slowly (so many rocks!), so we continue excavating at the edges of the plan. Two parallel walls are emerging at the edge of the stone pavement and the end of the semi-circular wall. They are heading east, and we need to chase them to their ends and hopefully find the return wall. We are beginning to see the footprint of a structure!

August 22, 1994
Rick, Conrad, and I work together to lay out an eastward extension on our cleared area to encompass the extent of the parallel walls, which seem to stop dead near the modern barbed-wire fence that bisects the site. I suspect the east end of the building has been destroyed. We work efficiently and get a nice-looking rectangle laid out and begin clearing overburden from it.

As I am working toward the line along the southern boundary of this new area, I glance to my right where Annmarie is mapping a contiguous line. Only, the two lines bear no relation to one another – instead of being parallel, they would cross if extended! Something is wrong with our new corners, and Conrad, Rick, and I spend the next half hour trying to work it out. Mike S. and Annmarie politely ignore us as we trip over each other, transpose numbers, tangle tapes, and start over from scratch. Finally, we achieve a close-to-perfect rectangle! Monday morning.

Lunch under the great oak in the field to the east of the site is dominated by the ever-more aggressive squirrel population. This morning we found a squirrel in one of our trenches, digging a hole in the corner! This kind of help we don’t need. The bulls in the pasture across Kellogg Creek gave us quite a performance with great bellowing and kicking up of dirt. No cows in sight, so they must have been talking to each other.

September 1, 1994
It is extremely windy today, so when we put up the tents we leave the covers off. Everyone is a little cranky and annoyed as the wind is making it hard to accomplish anything. The bonus is a thick bank of pink fog hovering over a very nearby hilltop to the southwest.

Conrad is excavating an exploratory trench (3 feet wide by 78 feet long) into the pasture to the east to see if our structure extends in that direction. He began digging 3-foot sections of it at 3-foot intervals. He got through three of these, then switched to 6-foot sections because 3 feet was too small an area to work in. The soil proves to be even harder here than anything we have dug so far, and it comes up in huge hunks. After one 6-foot unit I decide this is an exercise in futility. Even if we get lucky enough to put our trench where there is something, we’d never find it with the soil so hard. A “surface” would certainly go undetected, and a rock feature might get torn up. Furthermore, we don’t know for sure how deep the deposits are here.

We need to do some remote sensing, as Adrian and I discussed last week. I hope we can arrange for the magnetometer survey.

September 14, 1994
Spotted a small rattlesnake slithering across the exposed earth to the west of the Adobe. Mike S. identifies it as a baby; speculation about the strength of baby vs. adult rattlesnake venom runs rampant. Mike hooks snake on end of long hoe and removes it from vicinity of excavation.

September 19, 1994
Met with Mark H. to discuss the results of his magnetometer survey. He shows us his resistivity maps, which illustrate three areas we need to investigate with exploratory excavations. There are two areas of very high resistivity (which means, as Mark explained, that the soil did not conduct the electromagnetic impulse from the machine very
well compared to the soil surrounding it) and one of extremely low resistivity (or high conductivity). By 9:30 the entire crew of colleagues showed up: Pat W. (Bureau of Reclamation), Frank A. (independent scholar, Basque studies), Julia C. (archaeologist); Gene P. (archaeological photographer), and Adrian and Mary P. (the bosses). The site visit went well. Julia C. offered some valuable thoughts on our stone features. First, she said that our semicircular stacked-stone wall could not be an oven since the walls as they exist could not have supported a domed roof. We hypothesized about it being an open hearth — there is certainly plenty of evidence that the wall and the ground at its foot were subjected to high heat — but Julia C. felt that it was too big to be heat efficient.

As for the rectangular appendage at the back of the wall, she took one look and confirmed our suspicions that it is a bread oven. She described it as a “D-shaped” oven, not uncommon at sites in the Sierra Nevada. She has recorded hundreds of these. The baking surface of the oven was made of those fired adobe bricks we’ve been finding. The dome, which is completely gone, was probably of the same material.

While all this was going on, the crew was working away. Anmarie M. and Rick W. recorded zillions of elevations since we have the transit for today only. They did a few radials and established datum points in several places.

September 22, 1994
Mike S. has uncovered a dense concentration of household garbage up against the outside of the south adobe wall. There are lots and lots of bones and metal — is this a trash pit? This could be a significant find. So far we’ve been mostly focusing on the architecture, but if this is a discrete deposit of trash it will give us the chance to look closely at a single moment in time. If we can securely date the refuse, we can figure out what a specific group of people was eating, drinking, and buying. Adrian is going to love this.

September 23, 1994
Will this parade of wild creatures ever cease? Today we found a tarantula wandering across the stone pavement. It’s a good 4 inches across; this is almost too much for me. Mike S., who claims to have had one of these for a pet, picks it up and coos. I am appalled. Now everyone wants to share in the experience. I’ll take the pictures.

September 27, 1994
What a day! First, one of Mark’s magnetometer anomalies looks like it’s really paying off! We have a large pit on the west side of the house; it is full of ash, charcoal, bones, metal, a nice mold-blown bottle with a pontil mark, the mouthpiece of a white clay pipe, at least one buckle, and fragments of fired adobe brick (which must mean that the pit was filled after the bread oven was disassembled). We are first digging just a small section of the pit so we can see the sequence of fills in the side wall. By the end of the day Conrad P. has excavated about 3 feet and is not at the bottom.

This silver-colored pocket knife likely fell from the pocket of a ranch hand working at the Basco Adobe. It was found by archaeologists. (Drawing by Nina Ilic)

Meanwhile, Mike S. continues to work on the feature on the south side of the adobe. He has come up with a few pieces of whiteware with makers’ marks. One is “John Edwards” with a capped shield; another is marked “Stone China/Hope & Carter/Burslem” with a front-facing lion on the left of a crowned shield and a unicorn in profile on the right. According to Mary P., these were manufactured 1847-1900 and 1862-1880, respectively — this could be early trash!

This feature is still a bit of a mystery, and will remain so until we actually dig it. So far, it looks more like a pile than a pit, but we’ll see if there’s any depth to it. It almost looks like a bucket or two (or three) of refuse was thrown up against the wall. The bulk of the material is 8 inches or so out from the wall, and there is a “tail” dragging out beyond that. The ceramics are concentrated up against the wall, while bones dominate the rest of the de-
posit. There are also some bits of adobe brick at the tail end (so does this mean that the deposit must post-date the use of the oven?).

The "Uni-Lift" arrived in the afternoon – now we can get a good 40 feet above the site to take some overhead shots. I don't like this machine, but forced myself to get into the little bucket and work the controls to fly high in the air. What an amazing view! It alters the way I see the site completely. For the first time, I really get a sense of this structure. There's the bread oven abutting the strange, semi-circular fireplace at the west end. The fireplace opens onto a small room that we think was the kitchen. The kitchen is attached to a larger room, and I see clearly for the first time that the walls really do stop in line with the modern barbed-wire fence.

Obviously the structure was truncated by activities that went on in the pasture to the east. I see how lucky we are that the bulk of the adobe happened to be outside this pasture. The flagstone paving looks much more formal from this vantage point, and I even see a curve at the north side of the pavement that mirrors the shape of the fireplace.

Mr. S., who ranches the land here, stopped by and declined our offer of a ride in the lift. Imagine. He did, however, warn us that there are 30 bulls in a pasture near where we are going this afternoon to look at another site.

October 4, 1994
Conrad's pit keeps growing. He is getting some early material out of it, including molded whitewares (a 12-sided plate, for one), a bottle with a pontil mark, and a pipestem embossed "Glasgow" (so, it's pre-1891).
October 14, 1994

Last day on the site! We photograph our deep pit and finish up various records. Adrian and Mike S. take over from Conrad: we need two people to get this done today. At first, Adrian thought he could see the sterile clay bottom in part of our sidewall. But, alas, it’s never that easy on the last day of work. The layers they are excavating today are nearly clean of artifacts, with only a few bones to show for their efforts. But the soil is very mottled and clearly represents fill.

The two keep excavating and find that the pit is at least 7 feet deep! We decide, based primarily on its size and irregular shape, that this was dug as a borrow pit to mine the native clay for the fabrication of adobe bricks to be used in the house. The pit was then partially filled with some of the leftover dirt (the mottled soil Adrian and Mike dug out today), then left open until it was used as a trash pit (which included adobe brick and rock suggesting dismantling of the oven).

As soon as Adrian and Mike hit bottom, Mike jumped into the pit to draw the cross-section. We are nearing the end of the day, and we can’t leave until we fill the pit back up (we don’t want any of Mr. S.’s cows to fall in). With the entire crew breathing down Mike’s neck, he completes a fair representation of the pit’s fill layers. With speed and efficiency in mind, we employ both wheelbarrows, taking turns dumping dirt into the hole. Dirt is constantly flying as four people stand on the backdirt pile shoveling madly, while two keep the barrows moving. It’s hard to believe how much dirt we took out of that hole.

After more than an hour we are finally finished. I take one last picture of the slightly mounded earth over the so-recently gaping hole. In all this flurry of activity I forget to reflect on my feelings about leaving this site that has been home for the last two-and-a-half months. But of course I won’t really be leaving it for some time to come as I will spend the next couple years, on-and-off, examining our results and reporting on them.

A Note: While this “Tale” is based on my actual field notebook, I took liberties with the excerpts in order to present a comprehensible narrative. Mostly I removed technical details that non-archaeologists would have difficulty making sense of without lengthy explanations. Although all events recorded actually took place on the dates represented here, I have elaborated and rephrased in places – GZ.
For Further Reading

Archaeologists, ethnographers, and historians working for the Contra Costa Water District have written several technical reports about their discoveries on the Vasco. They are available at public libraries in Contra Costa and Alameda counties:


If you would like to learn more about historical archaeology, we suggest:

