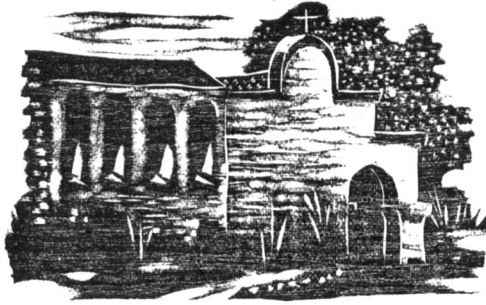


Top: Shades of the bandit Juan Flores haunt, the Tomás Burruel adobe. ***Center:*** José Antonio Yorba II adobe, ancestral home of the Yorbas. ***Bottom:*** *Casa de tapanco con alto* of the Oyhárzabales.



Old San Juan

Last Stronghold of Spanish California

By ALFONSO YORBA

Hidden amid the rounded brown hills of the southland in the little green valley of San Juan Capistrano, half way between Los Angeles and San Diego, the last of the old Spanish pueblo towns sleeps on into 1935 almost untouched by the modern world. A long row of old adobe houses lines the main street—U.S. Highway 101—and in all corners of the little town one finds the crumbling adobes of yesterday.

Here in sleepy San Juan the Spanish Californian vaqueros still stride about the town with jingling spurs, silken bandanas, and black, flat topped Spanish hats. Here too is the home of the fandangos, of the *Son*, the *Jota*, and the *Jarabe*. From behind the thick white walls and through the open doorway comes the soft strumming of the guitar as old melodies, now lost to most of California, are revived for the fandangos of San Juan Capistrano.

A cavalcade of riders from the huge unbroken Spanish ranchos sweeps into town at a gallop. Here an *Ávila*, there a *Pico*, a *Yorba*, an *Aguilar*, a *Valenzuela*, and a *Sepúlveda*—old names brought from ancient Spain to her newest province back in the 1760's by adventurous young volunteer soldiers who in their later years were to live as *grandees* on the crown lands granted them by a grateful king.

Historical Society of Southern California

Dominated by their mother, the far-famed "Jewel of the Missions," with its 157 year old Serra church, the fourteen old *casas de tapanco* of the mission pueblo lend to Capistrano town an atmosphere now long lost to the rest of the state. Practically all of these adobes were built by the Indian neophytes of the mission as parts of the mission establishment between 1794 and 1807 according to the reports of the missionary Padres describing their building activities.

Just to the east of the mission the rambling old Cañedo adobe with the sagging posts of its long veranda planted in a dirt floor, untouched by modern hands, presents a sight seldom seen in this era of "re-stored" adobes. Built between 1794 and 1807 for the Cañedo soldiers of the mission guard, it has never left the hands of the original family. In 1862 its owner Don Salvador Cañedo, waxing rich on his herds, sent his vaqueros north to San Francisco to dispose of enough cattle to dispatch a ship load of lumber. With the wood he intended to raise a shingle roof, install wooden floors, and spacious corridors. But the vaqueros returned from the long trip with the germs of the black smallpox, and in the resulting epidemic nearly 150 Indians and Spaniards were carried away—among them Don Salvador, who, out of the shipload of lumber, received only enough for a coffin and a cross, the rest being used for like service to the other victims.

An old tile roof farther down the street attracts one to the Hacienda Aguilar, though only a fragment is left of the large establishment of the last of the Mexican alcaldes of Capistrano, Don Blas Aguilar. The northern wing of ten rooms is known as the "*Casa de Esperanza*," and has been made into a treasure house of Old California by the grandson of Don Blas, Don Juan Aguilar, whose future plans for the house include rebuilding fallen walls about the patio and installing a Spanish tea garden and museum. While choice Navajo rugs cover the floors, the walls and partitions of the huge adobe are hung with sombre oil paintings and rare old serapes—of a type no longer made. Swords, daggers, and one of those famous California lances from the battle of San Pasqual are to be seen, along with branding irons of the old ranchos, choice Indian stonework, wampum, old coins, rare Manila and China shawls, and a chest full of aged documents. At the foot of the 1795 four-poster bed of Spanish cherry wood brought around the Horn from Spain is an old leather-bound chest, painted with multicolored designs and studded with brass nails. Up in the Cañedo adobe in which lived Don Juan's father, Don Jesús

Old San Juan

Aguilar, are five more of these chests, of bright red leather, artfully decorated.

Nowhere in all California is there a spot so completely Californian. And for those who would see how the last alcalde, Don Blas, lived from 1841 to 1885, the door of the "*Casa Tejada*," forming the south wing, and belonging to Don Manuel Manríquez y Aguilar, is thrown open. The flooring is of old mission tiles, and above, over the crude wooden beams, may be seen the century-and-a-half-old Spanish roof tiles—for this house was constructed in the 1790's, and if we may believe tradition, its first occupant was Isidro Aguilar, the half-Aztec stone mason from Culiacán, who from 1799 to 1803 superintended the building of the great stone church at Capistrano. From then until 1841 when Don Blas Aguilar, ex-mayordomo of the Mission San Diego, purchased it from Zeferino Taroge, last Indian chanter of the mission, it served as the dwelling of the Spanish mayordomos of San Juan Capistrano Mission.

Leaving the Hacienda Aguilar with the parting *adiós* of its hospitable owner, the next adobe, at the end of the street, beckons darkly from sombre shadows beneath heavy foliage. But dark as it appears, its story is even darker. Here until a few years ago lived the famed Chola Martina, who, three quarters of a century ago, as the beautiful young sweetheart of the *bandido* Juan Flores, played the key part in more than one bold assassination, including the massacre of Sheriff Barton and his entire posse near *Los Alisos*, not far away. In 1858 she caused the German Jew, Don Jorge Pflugardt, to open his door, while her lover, his six-shooter resting on her shoulder, calmly blew out the unfortunate merchant's brains. Some say Flores entered with his band to eat the murdered man's supper. Her lover dead and her beauty gone, the Chola Martina lingered on to a great old age in the sombre, shadow-shrouded adobe, scarcely changed since the handsome and dashing young bandit chieftain tied his gaily-caparisoned horse to these very posts of the old verandah. Its present owner, Doña Josefina Ybarra de Hunn, inherited it from her god-father, Don Tomás Burruel, whose servant was the Chola Martina.

Almost straight to the west, the long, ancestral home of the Yorbas with its aristocratic colonnaded corridor, faces us, fronting on the main highway. Here Don José Antonio Yorba II, eldest son and namesake of the Alférez José Antonio Yorba (who came to California in 1769 as a corporal in Pedro Fages' Royal Catalán Volunteer troops)

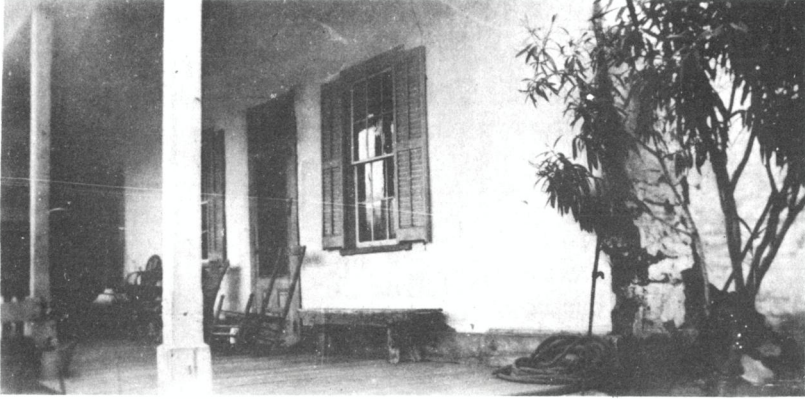
Historical Society of Southern California

had his home long before 1841 when the Mission Indian Pueblo was finally broken up and its broad lands and seventy odd adobe houses were awarded to the few remaining Indians and to pioneer Spanish families. For in that manner was founded the short-lived Pueblo de San Juan de Argüello, as Capistrano was then temporarily re-named. Aside from bearing the oldest name in the region, Don José Antonio seems to have had the largest family, for in the 1860's we find him ceding over the house to his son Miguel and the latter's numerous descendants, while he retired to the royal grant, Santiago de Santa Ana, his other sons dispersing to Santa Ana, Las Bolsas, Los Angeles, and, as in the case of the writer's great-grandfather, Don José Antonio Yorba III, even to La Frontera, in Baja California. The San Juan Capistrano Yorbas are the oldest branch of the Yorba family in California, the Santa Ana Yorbas being descended from younger brothers of Don José A. Yorba II. The south part of this adobe, formerly separated from the rest by a narrow passageway, was the old *Juzgado*, or court room of the pueblo, and the thick-walled west wing, still standing, was the *calabozo*, or jail.

To the north stands another finely preserved Yorba adobe, with sparkling white walls and deep green window cases and porches. It was the pueblo house of Don Domingo Yorba, once proud lord of the Rancho Nigüil at El Toro, where he maintained two more adobes and a large wooden ranch headquarters. Both of these ancestral homes passed from the Yorba family in days of want when the ranchos, cattle, sheep, and horses melted away and the pastoral days of the Dons came to a close.

Next is the two story *casa de tapanco* of the late Don Domingo Oyhárbabal. It was built by Don Manuel García in the forties, and boasts an elegant carved and painted Spanish balcony running the full length of the upstairs corridor. In the 1880's it was acquired by Don Domingo, the wealthy Basque sheep man, in whose family it remains today.

But little remains today of the high-ceilinged, aristocratic adobe just to the north of the Oyhárbabales. Its green shutters are faded and its old timbered corridor has decayed, and of Don Juan Ávila, "El Rico's," fine long mansion of the forties, fifties, and sixties, only the southern three rooms, palatial though they are, remain. In the late 70's a disastrous fire destroyed the interior of the greater portion to the north, and it was never rebuilt. Once extending from the remain-



Top: Remnant of the Juan Ávila adobe, *El Rico's* mansion of yesterday. *Center:* Scene of the fandangos: *Casa de los Ríos*. *Bottom:* Doña Polonia's adobe.

Old San Juan

ing portion northward almost to the corner, the town-house of rich and influential Don Juan Ávila long remained one of the most elegant mansions of all California. There, in a subterranean chamber beneath his bedroom, Don Juan kept his huge treasure chest—so heavy that eight people could hardly drag it from the burning house to safety. The ultimate fate of a strong box of *onzas de oro*, on top of which Don Juan placed his gold watch bearing a miniature of his wife, Doña Soledad Yorba, which he extracted from the chest at that time, has long troubled treasure seekers at San Juan.

Before reaching the corner north of Juan Ávila's home one passes an inconspicuous shoe shop. Four feet back from the front windows, enclosed behind a modern "front," stands the Pedro Valenzuela adobe. Only from the rear can the old walls be seen unimpeded. Here lived Antonio Valenzuela, grantee of this house and 200 varas of pueblo land in 1841. His son Pedro, the second owner, died here in 1871, to be succeeded by the house's last Valenzuela owner, the celebrated vaquero Ambrosio Valenzuela, best rider among the Rancho Santa Margarita's host of crack cowboys. Don Ambrosio died as he had lived—in the saddle—leaving a large family of boys, all top-notch vaqueros of the pueblo town today.

To the left, a little street leads down the hill to the ancient *Casa de los Ríos*. Built in 1794 by Indian neophytes for their own use, it has remained in the possession of the direct descendants of the original Mission Indian family for 140 years. In 1933 after the earthquake had tumbled some walls, an adobe brick over the western portal was discovered on which, while still wet, had been traced the distinct date "1794." It is the scene each week-end of the old fandangos which the Ríos have never abandoned since Mission days. In an enramada of branches laced with rawhide, and in the little cafe by the road the Ríos family maintain a Spanish California kitchen where the old Californian dishes are served under the shadow of the ancestral adobe.

A brief visit to the José M. Silvas adobe, four houses down the street from the corner south of the Ríos, gives a good impression of the dozen or more little one-room Indian adobes that until a few years ago lined this crooked and rambling old *Calle Occidental*. These same whitewashed picket fences, running half the length of the street, once enclosed scores of such adobes as this, before cheap lumber brought about the change. Indeed, in the late 1870's there were in San Juan Capistrano over sixty adobe houses, scores of

Historical Society of Southern California

Indians of the ex-Mission, and remnants of the great bandit bands of Joaquín Murrieta, Juan Flores, Tiburcio Vásquez, and others. The coming of the railroad ended the town's isolation, and the *bandidos* withdrew to Sonora and Lower California, leaving long rows of old adobes to melt down with the rains, unheeded, while their descendants were content to live in little wooden shacks near the ruins.

Two houses north of the Ríos adobe stands the long-dilapidated adobe of Doña Polonia Montáñez, famous character in Monsignore St. John O'Sullivan's and Mr. Saunder's charming book "*Capistrano Nights*." In the no longer extant chapel that stood in the north part of the tile paved corridor the *Alabanzas de Mayo* and other religious ceremonies were held during the long period when the Mission was closed and deserted. The building now belongs to Don Rodolfo Yorba.

Leaving the pueblo and climbing the first hill to the east brings into view one of the Indian adobes that overlooked the great orchard and garden of the mission in the flat below. The few visitors to the pueblo who care to motor farther up the cañon, here and there passing a lone vaquero riding disdainfully beside the orange groves, may be rewarded with a glimpse of another beautiful old *casa de tapanco* amid the orange trees to the south of the road. The Miguel Parra adobe boasts not only the old *rejas*, or iron window bars of long ago, but also wooden shutters without and glass windows within. It stands uninhabited beneath the tall olive trees and enveloping rows of citrus.

A quick dash back to the coast about a mile and a half south of Capistrano and one is on the *Rancho Boca de la Playa*, whose aged adobe rancho house occupies the edge of the hill overlooking the valley and the ocean. Built as a headquarters for the mission's thriving trade in hides and tallow with the Yankee ships, on one of which came Richard Dana to immortalize this roadstead and these cliffs in his "*Two Years Before the Mast*," the large mission adobe was acquired by an alcalde of San Juan, Don Emígdio Véjar, along with the choice lands of *Rancho Boca de la Playa*. Passing to the Pryor family from Pablo Pryor's father-in-law, Juan Ávila, the large adobe hacienda and a portion of the Rancho now belong to Don Miguel Yorba's family. Within, the highly polished beams of the ceiling, the thick walls, deep carpets and crystal chandeliers make it one of the most beautiful adobes in all California.

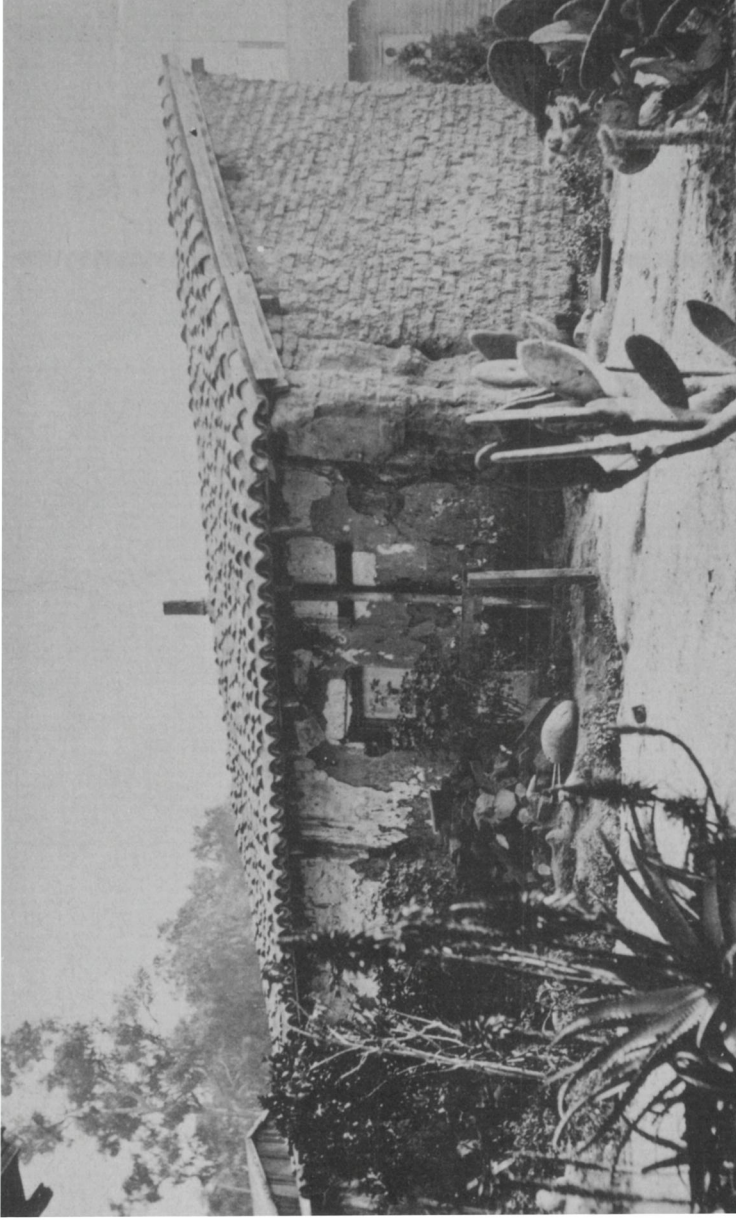
Back in the pueblo the dusk is gathering and the *Californios* are

Old San Juan

coming in from the ranchos to spend the early part of the evening in the town. The early comers hasten down to the *rebote* (Basque handball) court, built through the munificence of the rich Oyhá-zabales behind the Pedro Valenzuela adobe—for *rebote* is the “national sport” of Old San Juan. Here the supposedly tired *labradores* vie with shop keepers, until the lordly *vaqueros* come in, hitching their horses, and casting off their spurs and sombreros. Tying multi-colored bandana handkerchiefs about their heads they plunge into the *rebote* game, boots and all.

At the *rebote* court, in the post office, at the mission, and about the streets it is “¿Qué hubo vale Cuchi?” “¡Buenas noches, Don Juan!” “¿Qué dices tú, Loco?”—for Castillian is still the mother tongue of the San Juaneños, and nicknames or *sobrenombres* hold sway as of old. Because one of Ambrosio Valenzuela’s cowboy sons was always losing his pencil at school, all posterity will know him as “Lápiz,” while his other brother is known as “El Loco,” and the eldest of the three as “El Chapo.” The writer of these lines became “El Zafado”—because he wrote them—and so it goes in laughing, singing, Old Californian San Juan.

¡Adiosito amigos!



La Casa Tejada, picturesque south wing of the Hacienda Aguilar.