

THE GREAT RANCHOS

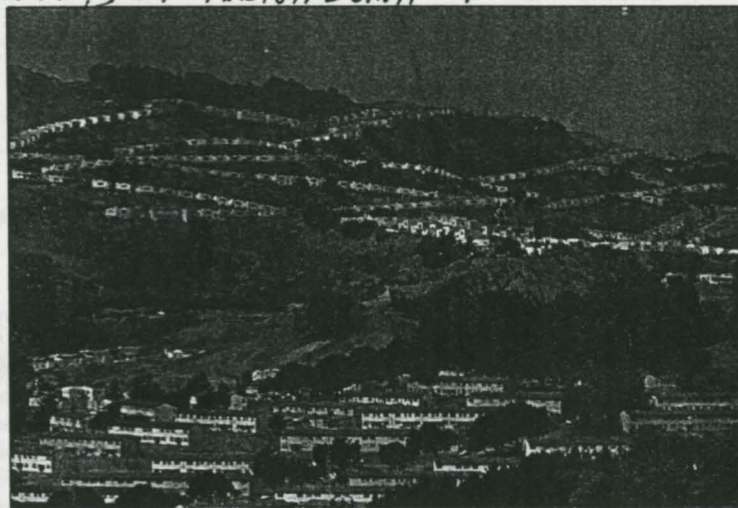
Sales, subdivisions, and sacrifice.

VISITATION VALLEY, S.F. NEIGHBORHOODS

IF THE GRASSLANDS OF the Point Conception ranchos do not survive, they will not be the first to have their physical integrity sacrificed to what is perceived as the larger social need. Most land grant families watched their lands vanish long ago. Beverly Waid of Orange is descended from a long line of such families—the Picos, Castros, Noriegas, and Lugos—which at one time owned an estimated two thirds of California's rancho lands. Today her legacy has shrunk to a few pieces of jewelry, Pio Pico's stickpin, a rawhide chair, and a collection of paintings and mementos. She never inherited the land, but at least she was spared the trauma of presiding over the life or death of the landscape, as the Hollisters, Bixbys, and other ranchero families have had to do.

IN 1784, JUAN JOSÉ DOMÍNGUEZ, A tough old veteran of the Portolá expedition, received the state's first Spanish land grant. Dominguez Hill, the commanding plateau which now overlooks the city of Long Beach, was the base of his 75,000-acre Rancho San Pedro.

To settle inheritance disputes, the entire rancho was divided among five sisters before the turn of the century. With that act, the family seemed to lose the ranchero commitment to the land. "We have little kin spirit today—it's too many generations back," says seventh-generation descendant of Juan José Domínguez, Ed Scheller, the friendly, practical man who is corporate secretary of one of the several Domínguez



A view of Visitation Valley today: the tragic fate of an orphaned rancho.

enterprises formed to manage the family's growth-ravaged land. "We'll keep a property as long as it's profitable, or we trade it off. Sentiment can go only so far," he adds, laughing, as we drive past the pumping oil wells perched like a flock of giant birds on top of Dominguez Hill.

Only 500 acres of the rancho, as yet undeveloped, remain in Dominguez hands. Sixty years ago, the original adobe and its gardens were sliced off the parcel and given to the Claretian Missionary Fathers, the only concession to sentiment as the land was liquidated. The palm-flanked adobe sits high on the hill like a stern duenna shaking her finger at the brashness and disheveled mess of Long Beach below.

AT PACHECO PASS, IN THE RANGE of hills that separates the San Joaquin and coastal valleys, Paula Fatjo was helpless to halt the flooding twenty years ago of Rancho San Luis Gonzaga's hay and grain fields as they were transformed into the San Luis Reservoir, a

holding lake for water being carried by the California Aqueduct from Northern to Southern California. With the flooding of the meadows that had unfailingly provided summer feed, the rancho lost the precious self-sufficiency that had allowed 48,000 of the original 150,000 acres of Pacheco holdings to remain in family hands.

Fatjo is a fifth-generation descendant of the Mexican artisan Francisco Pacheco, who acquired the land grant in 1843. A San Francisco beauty photographed at

balls in strapless taffeta gowns in the forties, she left city life and moved to Pacheco Pass 30 years ago to start her own Arabian horse and purebred cattle breeding operations.

When the reservoir was filled she tried to save the adobe home, built by Francisco Pacheco, by moving it to higher ground on a flatbed truck. "We almost made it," she says. "But on the way up it began to crumble." The brittle bricks fell in dust at her feet, unable to survive the changes any better than had the culture that made them. But Fatjo still holds some of the land and will hand it on as she found it. "I am simply a caretaker," she says.

TO FLY LOW OVER PAULA FATJO'S languorous hills, their velvety fingers dipping into the man-made lake that doomed her meadows, and then fly east over the San Joaquin Valley's lush patchwork of crops, is to understand the impact that the Yankee ideal of progress had on the land. The sprawling Rancho

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Sanjon de Santa Rita, remnant of the land and cattle empire built by German immigrant Henry Miller in the 1850s, is dramatically visible from the air.

Applying his motto, "Wise men buy land; fools sell," Miller acquired fifteen ranchos—1 million acres of which included a 100-mile strip along the San Joaquin River—by buying out land grant heirs for as little as \$1.15 an acre. He then set out to remake the land. Where the ranchero had depended solely on the native grasses produced by the haphazard flooding of the San Joaquin to feed cattle, Miller built dams, dug canals, and spread floodwaters out to enrich new areas so he could raise grain to store for drought years.

Today, the Bowles Farming Company, made up of Miller's heirs, coaxes 12,000 acres of the original land to higher and higher productivity. "We're thinking of shifting into perennials, into grapes and nut trees," says ranch manager Wayne Weeks. "They can be the highest and best use of the land, depending on the market."

NAMED GRANDLY FOR THE THREE valleys it encompassed, the thirteen-square-mile Rancho Cañada de Guadalupe, La Visitación y Rodeo Viejo can be viewed from a promontory in McLaren Park in southern San

Francisco. It is a scene of profligate abuse: rows of tacky-tacky houses zigzag up the treeless faces of brown hills. The alluvial fan laid down beside the Bay by the vanished creeks of Visitacion Valley are filled with slaughterhouses, railroad tracks and train sheds, and the city's garbage dump. Dominating the valley is the vast mustard-colored, loaf-shape Cow Palace; the fields where cattle once grazed are filled with a black asphalt lake of parking lots and a drive-in movie.

The valley fell victim not only to the explosive growth of San Francisco after the gold rush but to the loss of continuing family ownership. Bought and traded several times since the original grant to General Vallejo's brother-in-law in 1841, it was finally sold off at a sheriff's auction in 1851. With all links to previous owners severed, the orphaned Visitacion Valley grew up without plan or purpose. //

WHILE VISITACION VALLEY WAS being paved, the Irvine Ranch in Orange County was making a graceful accommodation to change. Its fate was due in part to the difference in the destinies of land grants, north and south: forces of growth led swiftly to subdivision of most of the ranchos ringing San Francisco, a worldly merchant city by the mid-1800s—unlike Los Angeles, which re-

mained the hub of the cow country. Even more important, in the case of the Irvine property, was the fierce determination of a family to protect its 120,000-acre coastline spread accumulated in the 1860s.

The ranch was assembled from three land grants by James Irvine, a Scotch-Irish immigrant who had made money during the gold rush as a grocer in San Francisco, in partnership with Llewellyn Bixby. By converting from cattle to high-yield field crops, the Irvine Ranch survived drought, World War I, and the depression. Then Southern California went through a period of explosive growth in the 1950s, and Anaheim, Santa Ana, and Tustin nipped at the ranch's northern flanks.

Rather than allow the ranch to disintegrate piecemeal, as neighboring ranchos had, the Irvine family hired architect William Pereira to design the nation's largest planned community, encompassing the UC Irvine campus and the new city of Irvine. Homes and condos for high-income professionals, the palatial Fashion Island mall in Newport Center, and marinas, Jacuzzis, and tennis courts now cover the land. Thousands of acres are still committed to agriculture, though they, too, will be developed. Perhaps the old ranchero would gallop off in horror at what he sees, but at least the Irvines had the foresight to sit down and negotiate with destiny. —M.J.