



THE SANTA MARGARITA RANCH HOUSE

From a photograph, taken in 1941, in the collection of  
Mrs. Helen S. Giffen.

# The American Occupations of Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores

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**W**HEN on August 3, 1942, United States Marines took over the historic Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, in San Diego County, for a training center, it was the second time this old Mexican land grant had been occupied by American forces.

The first occupation of the ranch by an armed American force took place during the War with Mexico. In January 1847, General Stephen Watts Kearny and his men, nearly a month after the bloody battle of San Pascual, while on their way north, pitched camp on the ranch.<sup>1</sup> General Kearny met with no resistance. The owners of the property Andrés and Pío Pico, had prudently “vamoosed” ahead of the approaching Americans. General Kearny’s camp site was a tract of land that had originally been known as the Rancho San Onofre y Santa Margarita. A grant of 89,742 acres of the tract was made in 1841 by Governor Juan B. Alvarado to Andrés and Pío Pico. In 1844 the Pico brothers acquired the adjoining Las Flores property from the Indians, and their combined holdings were known as the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores. Later, part of the ex-mission lands of San Juan Capistrano were added by a subsequent owner, making a total of some 133,440 acres<sup>2</sup> which extended along the coast from the present site of Oceanside to San Clemente and inland along the course of the Santa Margarita River for a distance of fifteen miles. The valley was first named “Santa Margarita” by the Portola expedition in July 1769.<sup>3</sup>

Linked with the history of the Santa Margarita district is the career of an Englishman, John Forster, better known as Don Juan Forster, who married Ysidora Pico, sister of Andrés and Pío, in 1837. In 1844 he acquired the lands formerly belonging to the Mission San Juan Capistrano on which he ran his ever-increasing herds of cattle. As the years passed, Forster’s cattle fattened and the Forsters prospered, while the Picos on the neighboring Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores fared less and less well. In 1862 Pío Pico bought his brother Andrés’ half interest in the rancho, but by 1864 the impecunious Pío had scattered promissory notes with a lavish hand over California as far north as the offices of Pioche and Bayerque, San Francisco money lenders.<sup>4</sup> Forster, who had helped his brother-in-law many times before, now assumed the indebtedness and took over the ranch entirely. He moved into the adobe house and proceeded to enlarge and improve the buildings. Meanwhile, his son Marcos commenced building a substantial adobe on the Las Flores part of the ranch. The Forsters’ cattle business was one of the foremost in the

state for many years, and John Forster became a wealthy and influential man. However, numerous and long-drawn-out lawsuits over ownership and water rights<sup>5</sup> at last brought about Forster's financial collapse. He died in February 1882, and a few months later the ranch was sold by his heirs to Richard O'Neill. Shortly thereafter O'Neill transferred control of the ranch to James Flood of San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> O'Neill continued to live on the ranch and to conduct its affairs until his death, when these duties were assumed by his son, Jerome O'Neill. In 1906 the O'Neill interests received a deed for a half interest in the ranch. Through all its vicissitudes the ranch had remained undivided.<sup>7</sup>

The second military occupation of the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, nearly a hundred years after General Kearny's visit, occurred in 1942, when the historic ranch became Camp Joseph H. Pendleton. In March 1942 the United States Navy Department announced the purchase of approximately 123,000 acres of the ranch for the largest Marine Corps base in the country. The camp was named in honor of the late Major General Joseph H. Pendleton, U. S. Marine Corps, who had served in the Philippines, Nicaragua and Santo Domingo, and was dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on September 25, 1942.

The present "occupying force" is aware of the historic significance of the Camp Pendleton site, and the old Santa Margarita adobe, the adjacent winery and bunk house, and Las Flores ranch house have been restored and will be preserved. The Santa Margarita residencia,<sup>8</sup> built in the 1820's, will serve as a hospice for distinguished guests; the even older winery is now the museum and reception hall for visitors; and the bunk house contains the reception center office, a recreation room, and living quarters of the ranch hands. The Las Flores adobe, built in 1867, stands twelve miles to the westward and a few hundred yards from the ruins of Las Flores *estacion* of Mission San Luis Rey. The 115-year-old bell which was originally used at Las Flores *estacion* now hangs at the west gate of the Santa Margarita residencia.<sup>9</sup>

The marines stationed at Camp Pendleton are learning to handle boats and equipment in the surf that breaks on the long beach line of Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores and are training for combat duty over approximately 120,000 acres of the ranch's hills and canyons.

#### NOTES

1. See, for instance, George W. Ames, Jr., ed., "A Doctor Comes to California, the Diary of John S. Griffin," this *Quarterly*, XXI (December 1942), 347.

2. R. W. Brackett, *A History of the Ranchos of San Diego County*, (San Diego: Union Title Insurance & Trust Company, 1939), pp. 44, 46.

3. Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Fray Juan Crespi, Missionary Explorer on the Pacific Coast, 1769-1774* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1927), p. 133.

4. See Henry R. Wagner, "Edward Bosqui, Printer and Man of Affairs," this *Quarterly*, XXI (December 1942), 329, and Terry E. Stephenson, *Forster vs. Pico* (Santa Ana,

Calif.: Fine Arts Press, 1936), p. 11. The ranch was mortgaged to Pioche & Bayerque for about \$44,000, at 3 per cent per month. This debt, together with many other outstanding notes, caused the Picos to fear a deficiency judgment which would have jeopardized every acre they owned. Robert Glass Cleland, *The Cattle on a Thousand Hills . . .* (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library), 1941, p. 152.

5. For a detailed account of these suits see Stephenson, *op. cit.*

6. According to the San Diego *Union*, November 29, 1882, the price paid by O'Neill was \$250,000, and that paid by Flood, \$450,000; but Mr. M. Hall McAllister writes that he was told by a man who attended the auction in San Diego that the property was sold for only \$40,000, or 20c an acre for the 200,000 acres, and that O'Neill and Flood had to spend immediately an equal sum for a resurvey of the land, squatters' suits, fences, unpaid taxes, etc.

7. Information from the U. S. Marine Corps, San Francisco office, and *Camp Joseph H. Pendleton formerly Rancho Santa Margarita* [n. p.,: U. S. Marine Corps, 1943].

8. Brackett, *op. cit.*, p. 46; Benjamin Hayes, *Pioneer Notes from the Diaries of Judge Benjamin Hayes* (Los Angeles: privately printed, 1929), p. 118.

9. See Note 7.