



## President's Message



Richard B. Rothwell

I am pleased to report that CPHS is evolving from its formative stage to one of action. Your Board of Directors has approved two very significant projects, both of which promise to help preserve the history of Camp Pendleton.

First, we have committed \$10,000 donated by our members as matching funds for a grant request we will seek from a national organization interested in historical preservation. If our request is successful we will gift that grant along with our matching funds, \$20,000 in all, to the Marine Corps to help refurbish the Las Flores adobe. Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton has an open contract with the University of Vermont Graduate School of Historical Preservation to restore this historic home to its former grandeur. These funds will support the restoration of two rooms. Should our grant request be unsuccessful, we will still apply our \$10,000 to another worthy Base historical project.

Second, your Board has approved an expenditure of approximately \$3,000 to re-mat and reframe 15 original works of art by Colonel Charles Waterhouse USMC (Ret). Col Waterhouse is nationally known for his work depicting historical scenes, particularly those involving U.S. Marines. He painted these at Camp Pendleton in 1975 when thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees passed through the Base on their way to a new life in the United States. These paintings will enhance the Ranch House and will be available on loan to other museums.

Your Board of Directors continues to add talented members. I am pleased to announce that G. Wayne Eggleston has reported aboard. Wayne is a member of the San Clemente City Council and a former mayor of that city. He is also an avid supporter of historical preservation and a friend of the Corps. Wayne spearheaded the drives to restore the estate of Ole Hanson (developer of the City of San Clemente), now known as the Casa Romantica Cultural Center, and to create the beautiful Semper Fi Park in his city.

I must also relay a sad bit of history. The Ranch House is no longer the home of a Camp Pendleton

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## The Friendship of John Forster and Cave Coutts

By Paul Bryan Gray

Before 1942, Camp Pendleton was known as the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores. The U. S. Marine Corps Base now closely follows the boundaries of the original ranch founded in the Mexican era (before the additions by the O'Neills and Floods), and the largest to ever exist in old California. The western boundary of Camp Pendleton extends seven-

teen miles along the Pacific Ocean between San Clemente and Oceanside. A range of hills follows the highway until they veer toward the east. Beyond the sea, Camp Pendleton reaches more than twelve miles inland, a huge area of 108 square miles, about two and a half percent of San Diego County.

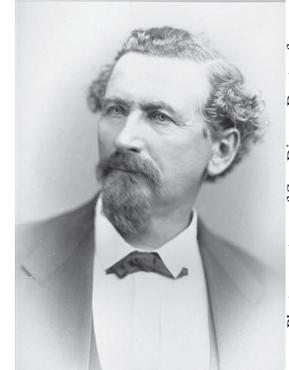


Photo courtesy of San Diego, Dept. of Parks & Recreation, History Archives

Best friends: (L) John Forster and (R) Cave Coutts

Incredibly, this vast area once belonged to a single owner, a pioneer named John Forster<sup>1</sup>. From 1864 to 1882, his family lived in the original ranch adobe, now extensively remodeled, and until this year, occupied by a senior general officer stationed at Camp Pendleton. Forster had the rare privilege of being able to stand on his land and truthfully say that he owned everything the eye could see. From his adobe homestead near the Santa Margarita River, all that was visible, far and near, belonged to him. From any central hilltop, the only perceptible limit to his domain was a distant glimmer of the Pacific Ocean.

Forster acquired the magnificent Rancho Santa Margarita in 1864 by purchasing it from Pio Pico, the last Mexican governor of California. The sale arrangements were later questioned by Pico, but a lawsuit during 1873 in San Diego confirmed legal title to Forster. The litigation between the men generated animosity that was particularly unfortunate since they were brothers-in-law. Forster had enjoyed a long marriage to Ysidora Pico, sister of the former governor. After taking possession of the Rancho Santa Margarita, Forster used it for raising thousands of cattle, a purpose for which it was ideally suited. He sold his animals for beef in the San Francisco market, frequently going there to make contracts with cattle buyers, a three-day trip by steamer. He was usually picked up at Oceanside by a small launch and rowed to the waiting ship.

<sup>1</sup>John Forster was referred to by Spanish speakers as "Don Juan Forster," but in all his correspondence, he signed his name "John."

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One of the most remarkable features of Forster's life on the Rancho Santa Margarita was his unbreakable friendship with Cave Coutts, owner of the nearby Rancho Guajome in the modern day City of Vista. The two men formed a strong bond even though their backgrounds were radically different. Forster was born in Liverpool, England and came to California at the age of fifteen. Coutts was a native of Tennessee educated at West Point. He arrived in San Diego during 1847 as a young lieutenant in the U.S. Army.

Even though Forster and Coutts lived only eight miles apart, they often communicated through notes they dispatched to one another by Indian messengers. When Forster was in San Francisco and Los Angeles, he sent long letters to Coutts describing the cattle market, politics, gossip, and other matters of interest. These documents are preserved at the Huntington Library in the Coutts Col-

lection, an incomparably rich source of information about life in Southern California in the late nineteenth century.

Forster and Coutts were fully immersed in California's early Mexican culture. Both were married to daughters of prominent Mexican families. Although they had marriages that lasted their entire lives, neither of their wives learned to speak English. In effect, they presided over Mexican households. Most of their children were given Spanish names. The men largely followed a Mexican lifestyle on their isolated Spanish-speaking ranches that left a deep imprint on them, even if they were not always conscious of it.

This phenomenon is shown in their correspondence. They always addressed each other as *compadre*, and each referred to the other's wife as "my *comadre*," something ordinary English-speaking people would not do. Their writing was filled with Spanish words and expressions that

each understood as a matter of course. Early American ranchers like Forster and Coutts were forced to embrace much of the Mexican way of life simply to survive in the ranching business.

Coutts built a spectacular 22-room adobe on the Rancho Guajome, which still stands today in the City of Vista at 2210 N. Santa Fe Avenue. It is owned by the County of San Diego and well-maintained among pleasant surroundings on 137 acres remaining from the original ranch. Those interested in history will find a beautifully authentic remnant of the past connected to the Rancho Santa Margarita by the friendship between John Forster and Cave Coutts.

Paul Bryan Gray is the author of *Forster vs. Pico, The Struggle for the Rancho Santa Margarita*, which was honored by the Historical Society of Southern California with its most prestigious award. Mr. Gray, whose next book is a biography of Francisco P. Ramirez, the editor of Los Angeles newspaper, *El Clamor Publico*, during the 1850s, practices law in Claremont, California.

Situated on a knoll overlooking the Santa Margarita River, the Ranch House complex covers 22 acres and includes an 8,400-square foot main house, a chapel, bunkhouse, laundry building, and several outbuildings. It has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1970. Around 1943 the Marines converted the old hacienda into an officer's club and BOQ. MSgt Vickers, a talented muralist, painted scenes on walls around the house. In the small dining room he depicted a San Francisco street scene. Legend has it that the mural showed a woman posed seductively in a second storey window.

When the Ranch House became a general officers' quarters in 1947, the first general's wife, Mrs. Graves B. Erskine, considered the mural inappropriate and had it and others covered with target cloth<sup>1</sup> and wood paneling. The legend continues that the wife of a general officer in the early fifties had the mural uncovered and the offending visage painted over with a window shade. More recent research indicates that the shade was probably there all along.

<sup>1</sup>Target cloth was the tough canvas used for targets that was coveted by Base occupants for multiple household uses.

## Life in the Ranch House

By Anne Estes



*The 8,400 square foot Ranch House is designed in the classic hacienda style around an inner courtyard.*

### Welcome to the Neighborhood

Lt. General Stephen G. Olmstead and his wife Vera have vivid memories of their two years in the Ranch House. On move-in day in 1978 they were in the southwest bedroom when a mountain lion walked by the screen door to the patio. Mrs. Olmstead still remembers the spots around the big cat's nose. She saw wildcats, sometimes with kit-

tens, on a number of occasions. At the time, there were horse corrals near the Ranch House and the Olmsteads worried that the cats might attack the vulnerable mares and foals.

The bougainvillea in the inner courtyard that has survived since around 1840 figured in Gen. Olmstead's assignment. He maintains that if the colorful bush were to take a turn for the worse on his watch, his career could suffer. General Olmstead has fond memories of personally blanching olives from the trees on the property and presenting jars to visitors.

### A Sign of Hospitality

From the earliest days, a white cross has stood atop a hill above the Ranch House, signaling welcome to all who see it. During their residence, the Olmsteads' guest book was signed by more than 12,000 visitors. In addition to many foreign dignitaries, such as Prince Hassan of Jordan, they hosted members of the original owner families.



*Vera Olmstead treasures the pillow given to her by the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores Docents as a memento of her time at the Ranch House. It is decorated with the names of the docents and a figure with the red vest and black hat costume worn by the docents. A mirror framed in the form of the Rancho Santa Margarita brand, the T hanging O, hangs on the wall of the Olmstead home in Virginia.*

### All in the Family

Many years after his retirement from the USMC, General Olmstead once again demonstrated his deep affection for the historic sites aboard the Base. He was instrumental in breaking the bureaucratic log jam that had prevented restoration on the chapel after the 1993 flood. The chapel had suffered extensive damage. Artifacts and seven of the eight stained glass

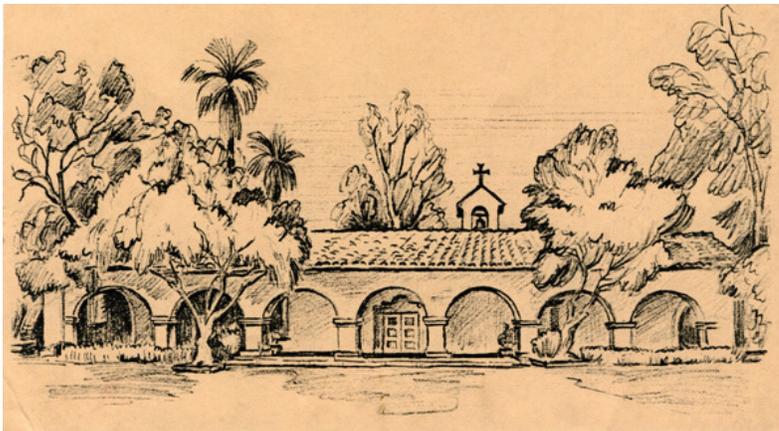
Friends' organizers, long-time docent, Ann Rothwell, and husband Dick Rothwell, Col. USMC (Ret.), helped to craft adobe bricks using the same methods and materials as the original builders. Unfortunately, Dick was wearing his class ring from the Naval Academy and its blue stone is now imbedded somewhere in the chapel's adobe bricks.

The missing "St. George" window was installed in 2007 and the chapel stands today as a testament to the dedication of its many friends.

### This Old House

Over the years there have been reports of "ghosts" and other strange phenomena in the Ranch House. Most have been associated with the room known as Dona Ysidora Pico Forster's bedroom. But there was a recent experience in the Presidents' Bedroom on the opposite side of the house.

In December, 2006, a Docent noticed an indentation in the big bed that dominates the room. She tried to smooth it out, but it resisted several attempts. She also



*A flood in 1993 washed away a large part of the circa 1810 adobe chapel building. This drawing, which depicts the chapel before the flood, was printed on a chapel program kept by Mrs. Vera Olmstead.*

windows were recovered from the mud that flowed down to the MCAS. A group calling itself "Friends of the Ranch House Chapel" was quickly organized after the flood and raised \$28,000 to fund repairs.

noticed that it was freezing cold. Two witnesses maintain that there was a quick breeze, after which the indentation was gone. It remains to be seen in what form the mysterious pres-

ence will manifest itself when the old house moves into its next phase. The most recent resident, MajGen Michael Lehnert and his wife, Denise, moved out in September 2007 to new quarters in the Del Mar area on the Base, and the building that was started over 160 years ago will undergo extensive renovation before beginning its 21st Century role yet to be determined.

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### Council of Advisors

*A distinguished group of advisors is helping to guide us as we grow. We are pleased to acknowledge their support.*

- Lt. Gen. M. T. Cooper**, USMC (Ret.)
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### Charter Members

Welcome aboard to new member Gordon L. Romine of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who has joined at the Ranchero level (\$100)

### Groundbreaker Volunteer Staff

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*Continued, President's Message*

general officer. The last residents, Major General and Mrs. Michael Lehnert, have moved to new quarters in the Del Mar area. Since it is not an official residence, government funding for maintenance is now minimal. While the Marine Corps seeks a long-term solution to the care and management of that historic property, the Base Historian will temporarily move part of her staff into the building. CPHS remains interested in assisting with fund raising once the Marine Corps selects a long-term manager.

*Richard B. Rothwell*

## **Get On Board**

One of the keys to building awareness of CPHS is networking with our friends. To help members become familiar with our story, we are offering two brochures for distribution. Please order your free copies by e-mail to Howard Blair at [hgblair@cox.net](mailto:hgblair@cox.net), or phone 858-583-0067.

## **New On Our Website**

Items of interest which may not be included in *Groundbreaker* are on our website, [www.camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org). For example, articles that appeared in the Marine League's magazine, *Semper Fi*, saluting Camp Pendleton's 65th Anniversary, have been reprinted. The latest posting features the first of a two-part essay by Dick Rothwell covering the history of the Base since 1942. Just click on "In the News," and check it out!

## **Stay Tuned**

Future issues will feature stories about the tradition of trail rides on the Base, a story about SSgt. Reckless, horse hero of the Korean War, and the first in a series of articles by the Base archaeologist, Stan Berryman, who will essay the pre-history of Camp Pendleton prior to the arrival of the Spanish. We invite our readers to contribute stories of their experiences aboard Camp Pendleton for publication in future issues. Humorous pieces would be particularly welcome. Please e-mail your 300 words or less to [anneestes@adelphia.net](mailto:anneestes@adelphia.net). Submissions may be subject to editing.

Camp Pendleton Historical Society, Inc. is a non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation

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