



President's Message

Richard B. Rothwell



Our 2013 fundraising event, which we again called "An Afternoon at the Ranch House," was a great success. Thanks to the

generous support of the Rancho Mission Viejo Corporation, the Pacific Marine Credit Union, the Daryl Issa Family Foundation, an anonymous donor, and our members and guests who attended, we raised some \$6,500 to support historical programs at Camp Pendleton. Brigadier General Vincent Coglianesse, Commanding General of Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, and his lovely wife, Mary, were among the guests.

A demonstration by military working dogs proved to be a special crowd pleaser. I would like to thank Kevin Cavanaugh for providing musical entertainment, Cocina del Charro for catering, the Mechanized Museum for their display of vintage vehicles, and the Ranch House Docents for bringing the stories of the Ranch House to life. It was a special day during which all had a good time in support of a worthy cause.

Since my last report, CPHS has donated over \$9,500 for a variety of Camp Pendleton historical programs: a custom display case for the Mechanized Museum, professional cleaning of a combat art painting of the Iwo Jima battlefield, and two half-track hulks for restoration by the Dirty Docents of the Mechanized Museum. Your continued support makes these gifts possible.

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Forster & O'Neill and Their Great Ranch

by Don Tryon

Editor's Note: The feature article this quarter is written by Don Tryon, friend of our vice president, Jim Williams, and member of the San Juan Capistrano Historical Society. Originally written for the SJCHS newsletter, we are pleased to be able to republish this gem for our members. Thanks to Don and Jim for directing this article our way. The article will be presented in two parts; this quarter and next quarter.

Rancho Mission Viejo is an active ranch in South Orange County, and back in time this ranch was one of the largest in California with over 200,000 acres and a history going back to the Mission days. It's still quite a large ranch; though much of it was developed as new cities with many homes and businesses. A California Don and two enterprising individuals with great vision made it what it is today.

John "Don Juan" Forster was born in 1815 in Liverpool, England, to a very unpretentious family. From this humble beginning he grew to become one of the largest landowners in all of California. At the age of 17, John had traveled by sail around the Horn to Mexico and found work with his uncle, James Johnson, in Guaymas, Mexico. Later he became the captain of one of his uncle's ships.

In 1836, he became a Mexican citizen and settled in San Pedro, finding employment with Yankee trader Abel Stearns. Forster learned good business practices while taking responsibility for all shipping and receiving of goods through Stearns' warehouse operations; and, in 1842, he was appointed first captain of the Port of San Pedro.

In 1837, he wooed and married Dona Ysidora Pico, sister of Pio Pico, the last governor of California in the Republic of Mexico. They had three sons, Marcos Antonio, John Fernando, and Francisco Pio, who died as a young man. Marcos and John were to serve him well in the family ranching business for 40 years.

Forster began acquiring land in the 1840s. He amassed an empire that ranged from the Lake Forest area to Oceanside and from the mountains to the sea. The major portions were Rancho Trabuco, with 22,184 acres, Rancho Mission Viejo at 47,431, and Los Potreros, 1,197. In San Diego County, he acquired Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, 133,440 acres, Rancho San Felipe, and Rancho de la Nacion. All his properties totaled about 250,000 acres.

In 1844, Forster and a friend, James McKinley, purchased the old ruins of Mission San Juan Capistrano for \$710 from his governor brother-in-law, Pio Pico. The Mexican government had secularized the Missions, and Pio was selling this property to friends and relatives. Here Forster made his home until 1864, when the Mission was given back to the Catholic Church by President Abraham Lincoln. Earlier Forster had acquired McKinley's share.

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Forster acquired the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores ranch from the brothers Andres and Pio Pico. The brothers got caught up in a lot of bad business practices and the excessive gambling debts of Pio Pico. One loan, from a couple of San Francisco money lenders, was for \$44,000 at 3% interest per month! They had numerous other loans all over the Los Angeles area. In desperation, the Picos offered the loan sharks 5,000 head of cattle, 500 horses, and the ranch to settle their debt. The lenders didn't want it. So Don Juan Forster, at great risk to his own shaky fortune, settled the debts, gave the Picos \$14,000, and became sole owner in 1864.

The previous four years had been extremely difficult for all ranchers. First, they had two years of serious floods that caused them to lose thousands of cattle, followed by two years of the most devastating drought and plague of grasshoppers that ever hit Southern California. This, too, wiped out most of the remaining cattle and just about ruined everyone.

After Forster lost his ownership of Mission San Juan Capistrano, he moved to the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores ranch house. The ranch house had been built sometime around 1827 and was badly in need of repair and remodeling. At this time it had only two bedrooms and a living room. Forster expanded the house to 18 rooms surrounding a flower-filled courtyard. It is still standing today and became the home of the commanding generals of Camp Pendleton until 2007. Now it's a museum.

After Don Juan acquired the ranch, he initiated good business practices and animal husbandry that quickly brought all his holdings to a successful and profitable basis. But in 1873, the California legislature passed a fencing law that brought financial ruin to many of the large landholders. They were required to fence in all their land as a measure to stop squatters from taking their land. Forster had to borrow

money to buy barbed wire, kegs of nails, and lumber to fence in all his ranch land, which was quite extensive. Timber was scarce in Southern California, so he shipped a load of fence posts from the north to San Diego and had it hauled out to his ranch. Extra laborers were hired to install the posts, which took several months. All this added to his debts.

In 1876, Don Juan came up with a scheme to build Forster City, a community in the San Onofre area. He travelled to Holland and offered prospective settlers 160 acres of land, five cows, two horses, and seed. His promotion was ill-fated, and only five buildings were ever located there. Another "pueblita" below the ranch never got beyond the planning stage.

Don Juan was sick and heartbroken due to the loss of his youngest son, Francisco, and passed away in 1882. He left a mortgage of \$207,000 and other debts to his wife, Ysidora, and two surviving sons. In order to settle his estate, the heirs offered the Forster ranch lands for sale. This caught the attention of two enterprising individuals, James Flood and Richard O'Neill. The former had the cash to invest and the other had the know-how to manage.

Richard O'Neill, the second of these two enterprising individuals, was born in 1824 in Mitchelstown, County Cork, Ireland. The O'Neill family migrated to New Brunswick on the Canadian Atlantic coast, and Richard became a butcher like his father. Richard O'Neill really didn't care much for butchering, so he travelled to Boston, where, in 1850, he boarded a sailing ship for California. Some believe it may have been while on this ship that he first became acquainted with James Flood. Whether they met on board or later in San Francisco, it led to a close friendship that resulted in great rewards for both.

Part 2 of 2 of the "Great Ranch" article will appear in the next Groundbreaker.

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On July 11 I gave a presentation on the history of Camp Pendleton to about 60 people at the historic Casa Romantica in San Clemente.

Following my talk, Pat Forster, a member of the CPHS Council of Advisors, and Paul Durance, president of the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores Docents, served with me on a panel to answer questions from the audience. Both the presentation and question and answers were well received.

We received good local exposure from a series of articles that I wrote about Camp Pendleton history. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* published them in its print and online editions. If there is a demand for additional, similar material, we will endeavor to provide it.

I look forward to reporting to you again in the next *Groundbreaker*. In the meantime, with your support, we will continue to help tell and preserve the history of the land known today as Camp Pendleton.

Richard B. Rathwell

Do you have a good Camp Pendleton story?

We welcome personal memoirs of experiences at Camp Pendleton for publication in future issues.

Please email your story (500 words or less) to calfrantz@verizon.net. (Submissions are subject to editing.)

CPHS members and guests enjoy an afternoon at the Ranch House on Saturday, August 3rd

We were pleased to host Base Commander BGen. Coglianese and his wife, Mary, as special guests. The event featured a military vehicles display from the Mechanized Museum, a silent auction and opportunity drawing, and a demonstration of military working dogs' training and tactics. As always, the ambiance of the historic Santa Margarita y Las Flores Ranch House was especially enjoyable, not to mention our success in raising some \$6,500. We thank Cpl. Brianna Turner of the *Camp Pendleton Scout* staff for these pictures.



Base Commander BGen. Coglianese, wife Mary, and CPHS President Dick Rothwell enjoy an afternoon at the Ranch House.



Checking out WWI vintage Marine Corps vehicles.



Some in the sun, some in the shade, all enjoyed the military working dogs demonstration.



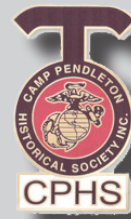
The opportunity drawing table offered many temptations.



The cool shade of the Ranch House courtyard is a pleasant place for an afternoon chat.



CPHS President Dick Rothwell, master of ceremonies, thanking our sponsors, donors and members for their support of our fundraising event.



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CPHS EVENTS SCHEDULE 2013

SEPTEMBER

3rdMAW, Miramar; Osprey/F-35
Overview; Lunch, Free Time to
Check Out Outdoor Aviation Museum
Date and Time TBD

DECEMBER

Docents Holiday Decorations
Location: The Ranch House
Date and Time TBD
(On a Friday)

Story of SSgt. Reckless

The story of SSgt. Reckless, who
lived out her retirement years at
the Camp Pendleton stables, has
resurfaced on the internet at:

[http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=jGP1fBfmjHY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGP1fBfmjHY)

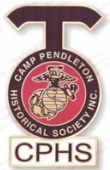


Also, a Google search of “Sgt. Reckless” will bring up many sites that tell the Reckless story. There is even a CBS news clip that reports on the recent dedication of the SSgt. Reckless memorial statue at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Quantico, Virginia.

CPHS MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

Active duty military can join the Camp Pendleton Historical Society for only \$35 a year.
Visit the CPHS website at www.camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org for more information.

Vaquero	\$ 50 donation	Ranchero	\$ 100 donation
Commander's Circle	\$ 250 donation	General's Board	\$ 500 donation



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