Neither Activists Nor Victims: Mexican Women's Historical Discourse: The Case of San Diego, 1820-1850

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INTRODUCTION

The history of women within the Spanish and Mexican far northern frontier before 1848 has been a topic of increasing interest among Chicana and Chicano historians. Although just in its infancy in terms of published work, the field of Chicana/Latina history has been steadily growing. The articles, books, and dissertations thus far have tended to revise older conceptions of Mexican women as passive, non-historical actors who were restricted to the domestic sphere. The search has been for women who have been important political and economic leaders in the past. This activist subtext in the historical writings about women in the former Spanish colony and Mexican territories has been interlaced with the theme of women as victims of patriarchy and male sexual aggression. The contemporary resonance of these historical writings is clear: just as current Chicana/Latina political consciousness has developed, so too has the natural tendency to search for and find a useable past, a historical tradition that can provide context for the social and political aspirations of contemporary women.

This essay takes a closer look at historical narratives generated by women during the Spanish-Mexican period in California in order to ascertain what other themes might be present. What have been the basic themes of these historical accounts? What relevance, if any, do they have to Chicana/Latina history and to our understanding of history in general? To answer these questions I analyze the historical accounts produced by Indo-European women who lived in the period from 1769 to 1848 in the oldest Alta California colonial settlement, San Diego.

WOMEN ON THE SPANISH AND MEXICAN FRONTIER

The importance of women on the far northern frontier of Mexico is undeniable. Most of the expeditions that went north into the hostile desert to establish pueblos and ranchos had their contingents of settler-families, including women and children. Women played a constructive role in ensuring that the Spanish settlements endured beyond the initial period of conquest. Indeed, as historian Antonia Castañeda has concluded, "the biological and social
reproduction of the Spanish-mestiza women were central to the imposition of Spanish hegemony on the frontier.” The ultimate success or failure of the Spanish empire in the Americas depended on controlling women; the Crown’s ability to attract, convert, and socialize Mexican immigrant women and indigenous women within the missions, pueblos, presidios, and haciendas of the far north had far-reaching implications for the growth of the frontier population and hence Spain’s ability to retain its territory.

Far from the “civilized” comforts of Mexico City, frontier women had to exercise great ingenuity, courage, and strength to make a domestic life possible. Most of the women in the Spanish frontier settlements were Hispanized natives (indígenas, or Indians) or mestizas who, out of necessity, adopted local Indian foods and customs to fit their family’s isolated condition. They cultivated local plants to use as home remedies for everything from snakebites to rheumatism. Some women were renowned curanderas, religious healers who combined spiritual incantation with herbal remedies to cure diseases caused by various brujos (witches) and evil forces.
Most of the medicine practiced on the frontier was in women’s hands, as was attending at childbirth, which was done by midwives.

Because of harsh conditions it was possible for mestizo women to be on a more on equal footing with men. Class distinctions, along with gender segregation and discrimination, became harder to maintain the farther away people moved from older-settled, colonial urban society. Men and women had to cooperate in order to survive. Women fought alongside men when settlements were attacked by Indians. They often labored in what might be considered “men’s work.” They tended herds and joined in rodeos, and they plowed and helped in fields. Others entered into commercial activity. Some women even acted as mayordomos, or overseers, of large ranchos.

While loosening some of the strictures of traditional, male-dominated Spanish society, the frontier still was hardly a paradise for women. In California, sexual abuse was commonplace against Amerindian women, and even spilled over into relations among gente de razón (non-Indian, so-called “civilized,” people), although the record of rape, incest, or other abuses is lean, perhaps because women did not report those cases or because men directed their assaults toward Indian women. What is known is that patriarchal tradition gave men the power to control and judge the sexual conduct of women. Although men were rarely held accountable for their own sexual depredations, they could inflict physical punishment for a wife or daughter’s sexual misconduct. Also, fathers could arrange the marriages of their daughters, even at the pre-pubescent stage of the child’s life.

**Mexican Women’s Historical Narratives**

Unfortunately the life histories of the thousands of “ordinary women” who lived on the Spanish/Mexican frontier are not available. For California, however, there is one prime source for getting at the way in which Mexican women thought about their personal histories. The Bancroft Library, at the University of California, Berkeley, has preserved more than a hundred reminiscences dictated by Californios in the nineteenth century. These were collected by Hubert Howe Bancroft’s assistants in preparation for his writing his monumental *History of California.* Of the California narratives, at least twelve were given by Californianas, dictated to Thomas Savage or Enrique Cerruti and hand-written in Spanish. These reminiscences were not entirely spontaneous, since the interviewers guided their subjects through questions that centered on the political and cultural history of Mexican California. Of the California dictations, Bancroft’s assistant Thomas Savage gathered four from women who had lived in the San Diego region: Doña Josefa Carrillo de Fitch, Doña Apolinaria Lorenzano, Doña Juan Machado de Ridington, and Doña Felipa Osuna de Marron. These were all oral histories reconstructed from memory, and as such they had the same problems as all primary sources with regard to accuracy of fact. Additionally, they also had a bias inherent in being solicited, probably edited, perhaps misquoted, and most certainly self-censored. A Californiana talking to a stranger was not likely to reveal her most secret thoughts or feelings. Nevertheless, as historical documents, these narrations give an invaluable personal insight into how Mexicanas thought about their history.

**Doña Josefa Carrillo de Fitch**

The story of Josefa Carrillo, daughter of the Joaquin Carrillo family in San Diego, is one of the best known in early California history. In 1829 she eloped with Henry Delano Fitch, an American merchant sea captain, thus becoming one of the first Californianas in San Diego to marry a foreigner. While the account of the romance has been told a number of times by historians, the narration she gave in 1875 at the age of sixty-five gives her version of events and differs from the “traditional” story in terms of emphasis and tone.

When Capt. Henry D. Fitch made a call on the port of San Diego in 1826, Josefa was introduced to him. She remembered that she was attracted to him by his “fine manners and handsome demeanor.” Within a year, he requested her hand in marriage, and her parents approved. Josefa promised to marry him, but she was legally unable to do so because he was a foreigner and a Protestant. Several years passed until Capt. Fitch agreed to be baptized Catholic in order to be married. On April 15, 1829, the day after his baptism, the marriage was to take place in San Diego. It was arranged for them to be married in her father’s house by Padre Melendez, the local priest. The day for the marriage arrived, and scores of family members and important guests assembled in the Carrillo parlor to witness the marriage vows.
Attracted to “the fine manners and handsome demeanor” of American merchant sea captain Henry Delano Fitch, Josefa Carrillo eloped with him to Valparaíso, Chile, after Governor Echeandia of California prevented their marriage. Although Josefa’s father “promised to kill her on sight,” when she returned, he pardoned her, and they celebrated the reconciliation with her mother and sisters. The description of this event is the most passionate in the narration of Doña Carrillo de Fitch. This photograph was taken fifty years after the elopement. San Diego Historical Society, Photograph Collection.

Halfway through the ceremony, a message arrived from Governor Echeandia ordering the rites to cease, on grounds that the marriage was a violation of the law. At this point the uncle, Domingo Carrillo, refused to be the marriage witness, and the priest stopped the ceremony. In Josefa’s view, the people who refused to continue with the ceremony were “persons who by character and education were accustomed to blindly obey all the government’s orders.” This tragic turn of events became a scandal when Capt. Henry Fitch convinced Josefa to elope with him. Actually, according to Josefa, Fitch never asked her in person but rather prevailed on his friend Don Pio Pico to talk to Josefa on his behalf. This Pico did because, in her words, he was “a man who you do not have to ask twice when it comes to helping a woman.” Evidently Pico was very convincing and even helped transport her to Fitch’s waiting launch. As they parted, according to Josefa, Pico said, ‘goodbye cousin, May God bless you, and you cousin Henry, be careful not to give Josefa a reason to regret her having joined her fate to yours.” In turn, Josefa remembered, Fitch promised to devote his life to her happiness.

Henry and Josefa sailed away towards the south and eventually were married in a Catholic ceremony in Valparaíso, Chile. After Fitch had conducted his business there, they sailed up the coast to Mexico. Josefa had given birth to a son by the time Capt. Fitch’s ship put into San Diego harbor for the first time since their elopement. When they anchored in the port, Josefa immediately went to visit her mother and sisters, who greeted her with great affection. The problem, she learned, was her father. He considered the family dishonored by the elopement, and when she returned, Josefa remembered, “he had promised to kill her on sight.”

Nevertheless, courageously determined to be reconciled or be killed, she went to beg his forgiveness. She entered the house alone and saw her father writing at a desk with a gun by his side. She said: “Father I have returned to San Diego to ask your pardon for me having left your house.” He remained silent, apparently angry. She then threw herself on her knees, and “in a humble tone begged for pardon reminding him that if she had disobeyed him it had been only to cast off a hated tyranny [Governor Echeandia] who overturned the laws and customs.” This was a masterstroke, since she knew that her father disliked Governor Echeandia. She talked on, but her father remained silent. Then, seeing that he was not looking at his gun, she got up and went
toward him, meanwhile continuing her petition for pardon. When she was six paces from him, he got up, turned around and embraced her saying "I pardon you daughter, you are not to blame if our governors are despot." Thus reconciled, she went out of the house and gave a sign to her mother and sisters to come in to celebrate the reconciliation. During the rest of the day, friends of the family came by to visit and wish her welcome, and that night her father sponsored a gran baile to formally welcome her back.12

After a time, Josefa and her husband had to go north to Monterey, where Capt. Fitch faced charges of forcible abduction. While in Monterey, Josefa was separated from her husband for three months, and eventually Governor Echeandía sent them to Mission San Gabriel where they were held as virtual prisoners. This lasted three months, until Catholic authorities in California determined that their marriage in Chile was legitimate. Nevertheless, Fitch had still broken the law, and as a penalty "Don Enrique" (Fitch) was given a penance of donating a fifty-pound bell for the church at Los Angeles pueblo, and the couple were commanded to hear high mass with lighted candles for three días festivos.13

This remarkable account of love, family honor, and governmental intervention illustrates how one woman remembered her ability to manipulate patriarchy. Josefa threw herself on her father's mercy but cleverly politicized her actions so he could accept her return with honor. The most important part in her narration, rendered in the most detail with the greatest passion, was not the marriage fiasco, the elopement, or the trial, but rather her confrontation with her father.

DOÑA APOLINARIA LORENZANA

Another californiana narrative is that of Doña Apolinaría Lorenzana, also known as "La Beata," an honorific title bestowed upon her by the californios. This sobriquet literally means "the pious one," earned because of her self-sacrificing work among the mission Indians as a teacher and nurse.14 She came to California as an orphan girl and was raised by a variety of families in Monterey and San Diego, thus giving her another nickname, "La Cuna," or "the foundling." She was a strong, independent woman who taught herself to read and write and consciously decided not to marry but instead devoted herself to the church, particularly to assist-
of their exemplary services, in the 1840s the Mexican government awarded her two ranchos, and she purchased a third, all of which she lost through the sharp dealings of American speculators after the Mexican War.15

As a teenager in the Presidio of San Diego during the 1820s, Doña Apolinaría helped Doña Tomasa Lugo teach girls to read and write the doctrina (catechism). When Lorenzana became very ill with a paralysis in her left hand that left her disabled, Father Sanche, the priest from San Diego de Alcalá, invited her to the mission to recuperate. Her condition worsened, so much so that at one point she seemed dead (parecía muerte). During the two and a half years it took her to recuperate, she began to help with the sick of the mission. She grew to be a well-known curandera for the native and local populations and worked in the mission infirmary.16 She also had other chores, such as teaching religion and sewing to the neophytes.

In 1878, Bancroft’s interviewer, Thomas Savage, asked her for details about her life in the mission, since that was where she spent most of her life. She recounted the rhythm of work and meals and the strict separation of the sexes governed by the india mayor, the matrona in charge of unmarried single women, most of whom were required to live in strictly regulated housing at the mission. Most of the Indian men, Doña Apolinaría reported, lived away from the mission on their rancheras. She testified to the punishments given the neophytes for unsatisfactory work or any delinquencies. These were administered by native alcaldes, who were in turn appointed by the priests. The punishments ranged from confinement in the mission calabozo (jail), with or without windows depending on the seriousness of the crime, to whipping “que raras veces paso 25 y en muchos ocasiones menos” (that rarely exceeded 25 lashes and on many occasions was less). For more serious crimes, the neophytes were turned over to the presidio soldiers. After secularization of the mission in the late 1830s, Doña Apolinaría continued to take care of the mission priest, Vicente Pascual Oliva.

Lorenzana remembered the raids and killings by the local Indians retaliating against theft of their lands or brutal treatment at the hands of the colonials. In the 1840s, María de Los Angeles, a californiana who was the wife of the mayordomo at Mission San Luis Rey, told her of her experience. The rebellion took place on Rancho de la Nación (today called National City), when the Christianized Indian house servants joined with the gentiles (unmissionized Indians) to kill the californio families on the rancho. That Indians themselves were divided over the issues of colonization is illustrated by the fact that soon after the attack some local mission Indians came to María de Los Angeles’s rancho to help defend her from possible harm. The threats of Indian attack persisted throughout the Mexican era. On other occasions Doña Lorenzana remembered how an Indian servant asked for protection for his family within the rancho’s fortified walls, but the californios were suspicious of his motives and searched him for arms before they would admit him. Lorenzana commented: “The horse stealing (by Indians) was continuous and the leaders were generally the former mission Indians who had convinced the gentiles to help them.”17

One of the most dramatic episodes remembered by Doña Apolinaría involved her experiences during the Mexican War (1846-48) at Mission San Luis Rey (in present-day Oceanside, twenty-five miles north of San Diego). She had gone there to take care of the mission father, who was dying, when Col. John C. Frémont, the commander of the American invading forces, arrived and occupied the mission. She said that she liked an American named Godey, whom Frémont had put in charge of the mission for the duration of the war, but she was distressed at the conquest. In her words, “I was very sad because of the conquest of the country by the Americans, and that is why I did not want to return to San Diego.”18 Instead, she went on to Mission San Juan Capistrano, where she stayed for a time with Father Oliva before returning to Mission San Luis Rey, where she stayed for two months during the californio reconquest of southern California in late 1846.

During this period, she noted, the Indians appeared to be pro-American and were taking advantage of the war to attack and kill the californios. “The Indians were very menacing,” she said. “Two days before we came [to San Luis Rey], six or seven of them on horseback rode up with red lances, a bad omen—they did not pay their respects to the padre but went to the wall where there was a fountain of water. An Indian approached and began to run through the halls trying to provoke an attack.”19 Even trusted neophyte servants became dangerous. She recounted how Santiago, the cook for the mission who had been staying with her and the other californio families who had taken refuge in the mission, suddenly joined with the gentiles to threaten them.

The narrative of Doña Apolinaría Lorenzana tells
us how she worked all her life with the mission Indians to convert and heal them. She was loyal to the padres and to the maintenance of the church even after it was secularized, and she never expressed any criticism of the treatment of the neophytes. Like other Californias, she had ambivalent feelings about the natives by whom she was surrounded. Undoubtedly she had close friends and even comadres within the Indian communities, but she also feared their treachery. She was a solid member of the California community in San Diego. For example, she was a padrina (godmother) to more than one hundred children, both native and Mexican. Every year during the pueblo’s pastorela (the shepherd’s play performed at Christmas), she made the costumes for the angels and was always given the honor of being in the play herself.

DOÑA JUANA MACHADO DE RIDINGTON

Doña Juana Machado was born in San Diego on March 8, 1814. Her father was María Manuel Machado, a soldier in the San Diego presidial company, and her mother was Serafina Valdez, a native of Santa Barbara. Doña Juana was sixty-four when Thomas Savage interviewed her at her home in north San Diego. He noted that, although she was not able to read or write, she spoke English fluently and was “quite intelligent.” Indeed, her historical memories prove to be among the most detailed of the California narratives. Her recollections begin with Bouchard’s pirate raid in 1818 and Mexican Independence celebrations in 1822 and progress through the decades with remarkable recall of names and dates.

Along with Doña Lorenzana, Juana Machado recalled various Indian battles, plots, and insurrections, illustrating the extent to which tension between settlers and natives was a central theme in colonial life. Her first historical memory was a bloody one involving a story of a battle between her father and “Christian Indian fugitives.” She remembered being told how her father fought hand-to-hand with one of the raiders before finally being “able to draw his knife and plunge it into the belly of the Indian, scattering his intestines and leaving him for dead.”

She described 1837 as a year when there were two community traumas involving the native population and the local Californias. The first was an Indian attack on Rancho Jamul, owned by María Antonio and Don Andrés Pico. This was a traumatic event for the San Diego community and especially memorable to the women. Living at the rancho were Doña Eustaquia López, mother of Don Andrés and María Antonio, and her three unmarried daughters. The story of the outrage as recounted by Doña Juana was obviously drawn from the collective folk knowledge of others. One afternoon an Indian servant confided in Doña Eustaquia that some surrounding Indians were planning on attacking the rancho to “kill the men, and make captives of the women.” In turn, without alarming her daughters, Doña Eustaquia talked to the rancho’s mayorón, Juan Leiva, and told him what she had learned. Leiva “assured her that there was no danger whatever” and “confident of his strength, refused to do what she advised.” For her own safety, Doña Eustaquia decided to leave the rancho with her daughters, which they did immediately by hiding under a cattle skin in a carreta and arriving at Doña Apolinaria’s rancho, where they rested before continuing on to San Diego.

Two days later, the Indians did attack the Jamul Rancho, killing Juan Leiva, one of his sons, and several others. The attackers carried off both of Leiva’s daughters, Tomasa and Ramona, who were fifteen and twelve years old respectively. They were also going to kill Leiva’s wife and her little boy, but because of their pleadings the Indians spared them. Instead, they stripped them naked and left, “taking with them horses, cattle, and all other things of value; and burned the houses.” Several expeditions went out from the presidio to try to recover the girls. Ransoms were offered, but refused, and Doña Juana heard from the Indians that the girls had been married to chiefs.

The second traumatic community event that Doña Machado remembered was the 1837 plot by Indians to attack the pueblo of San Diego. Juana told how it had been discovered when a loyal Indian servant named Candelaria had told her mistress, Doña Josefa Carrillo de Fitch (who was Juana Machado’s godmother), that she had overheard Indians in the household kitchen discussing a plan to kill the clerk in the Fitch store and “burn buildings and carry off the women.” Candelaria implicated three of the Fitch servants and some in other households. Doña Machado remembered that two of the conspirators were Christianized natives from Baja California, and two more were local natives. In reaction to the plot, the officer in charge, Alferez Macedonio Gonzalez, rounded up the conspirators and forced them to confess. The next day he took them to the nearby
Located in the San Diego backcountry, Rancho Santa María de los Peñasquitos, shown in this photograph, ca. 1880, was similar in design to Rancho Jamul, built like a fortress to provide defense against Indian attacks like the one on Doña Eustaquia Lopez and her three unmarried daughters at Rancho Jamul in 1837. San Diego Historical Society, Photograph Collection.

Protestant cemetery and had five of them shot. All this was without spiritual aid.

Doña Juana Machado also related her view of the complex political struggles that took place within Mexican California, adding some invaluable details regarding the appearance of some of the main political actors. Thus Don Luis Antonio Argüello “was tall, corpulent, with a big fat head and white with black eyes and very black hair.” And his brother, Santiago Argüello, was “very heavy of medium stature, very white with a beard and black hair—eyes the same color as his brothers.” Governor Echeandía was “a very white man, tall and thin with a handsome figure, elegant manners...very enthusiastic for dancing, food and other amusements.” She considered the Mexican government’s secularization of the missions a great mistake because “we believed that the Padres were virtual saints,” and the privatization of their property was “a huge robbery of the church.” Of Governor Micheltorena’s infamous Cholo troops, whom others accused of being thieves and criminals, “there were undoubtedly some good men among them and their officers conducted themselves well.”

Finally Doña Machado de Ridington recalled what she had heard about the Mexican War, including a forgotten massacre of eleven californio men by local natives intent on revenge against their former conquerors. A few days after the Battle of San Pascual, at which Stephen Kearny had been badly beaten by a californio force, a contingent of californio lancers was resting at a nearby rancho. The Indians, identified as those from Agua Caliente, in the San Diego backcountry, were led by Juan Garra and an American named Jim Marshall, who had married into the band. The natives took twelve Mexicans prisoner and were advised to kill them by Marshall and Garra, who falsely claimed that General Kearny had authorized and would reward the killing of cal-
ifornios. Eleven of the prisoners were then killed, but Doña Machado’s brother, Rafael, managed to escape.28

With the recollections of Doña Machado, we have the elaboration of a theme similar to that of Doña Lorenzana: the memory of Indian threats and depredations in Mexican San Diego. Her history was one that had been told to her, and thus her memories can be considered fragments of community recollection, most probably the views of other women with whom she discussed these events.

DOÑA FELIPA OSUNA DE MARRON

When Thomas Savage interviewed Doña Felipa Osuna de Marron in 1878, she had been a widow twenty-five years and was sixty-nine years old.29 Her father had been a soldier in the presidio during the Spanish administration, and when she was twenty she married a rancher, Juan María de Marron, who became the government-appointed administrator of Mission San Luis Rey following secularization. Doña Felipa reported memories of the Indian troubles already recounted by Doña Juana Machado, the last years of Padre María Zalvidia, whom she cared for at the mission, and accounts of her experiences during the Mexican War.

Of the attack on Rancho Jamul in 1837, Doña Felipa had nothing new to add to Juana Machado’s account, but she was a primary participant in discovering the plot by Indian servants in San Diego. She was the one who discovered the conspiracy, overhearing her Indian servant talking to some others about a plan to kill the American administrator of Fitch’s store and carry off Mrs. Fitch and Felipa. She immediately told the others, and preparations were made to capture the plotters in the Fitch kitchen. They were taken prisoner without a struggle.30

She gave the names of the Indians who were captured, but evidently did not view the executions. She was convinced that they were in league with Indians from outside the pueblo and that the threat was real, but finally, she expressed sorrow at the hysteria she had caused: “It was painful to see the soldiers...
run after the Indians like so many hunting dogs—
some of the Indians were dragged out of their
houses, others who ran were lassoed. One of them
hid in my house and begged me to hide him; but his
persecutors saw him enter and he was captured.”
And: “My affliction was great because I had been the
informant against the conspirators and because the
rest of the Señoras accused me of being the cause of
it all.” And: “When I saw all the tribulations of the
Indians it caused me much grief to have been the
informant against them, it afflicted me a great deal.”

Later the precipitous executions were regretted
even by some of the pueblo leaders, such as the
judge, Don María Antonio Estudillo. There were also
feared that, out of revenge, the families and bands of
the executed Indians would attack the pueblo in full
force.

In the matter of the final days of the mission, Doña
Felipa testified to the rapaciousness of the mission
administrator, María Joaquin Ortega, and remem-
bered the condition of Father Zalvidia, who was evi-
dently suffering from a mental illness. The padre
was agitated night and day, stomping on the ground,
and conversing with the devil, often shouting out,
“Begone Satan. You can not trouble me—you have
no power over me.” On one occasion he wandered
out to the bull pasture and fell on his knees, crying
out to God to protect him. Miraculously, nothing
happened to him, and in fact the bulls learned to
tolerate his frequent excursions.

Doña Felipa lived at Mission San Luis Rey dur-
ing this time, her husband being absent elsewhere
for long periods of time. She came to regard the
padre as a holy man, but the other californios con-
sidered him mad. He flagellated himself frequently,
and on one occasion drove nails through his feet and
refused to be nursed. Finally, when it was apparent
that he was going to die, Fr. Vicente Pascual Oliva,
Doña Isidora Pico, Don Juan Avila, and Apolinaría
Lorenzana came to transport him to Mission San
Juan Capistrano, but he did not want to go. He died
before they could take him. Evidently the former
neophytes regarded him a folk saint and wanted a
piece of his robe before he was buried, so much so
that he was practically stripped naked before he was
buried.33

The second part of Doña Felipa’s memories con-
cerned the Mexican War. She was still living at the
mission in 1846, when Colonel Frémont and the
American troops arrived looking for the californio
leaders. The Americans questioned her regarding
her husband’s whereabouts and who else was at the
mission. As it happened, Don María Matías Moreno,
the secretary to the California government, was
with her when the Americans appeared, and Doña
Felipa decided to disguise him as a sick cousin.
Fooling, the Americans left. As soon as they had
departed, Don Matías, who had recognized his good
friend Don Santiago Argüello riding with the Amer-
icans, sent a messenger to catch up with him to tell
him to return. This sudden switching of allegiances
angered Felipa, since it put her in jeopardy, and she
ordered him to leave the mission immediately.

This episode revealed some of the schisms among
the californios regarding the American conquest.
Some supported the occupation by United States
forces, and others were opposed. Switching sides,
at least in the case of Don Matías, was prompted by
friendship more than ideology. Indeed, Doña Felipa
and her husband would be forced into changing
times, as she related in her narrative.

Soon after this incident at the mission, she went
with her husband to their rancho, and then later she
alone went to San Diego for safety. She recounted
how in San Diego Don Miguel Pedrorena, Don San-
tiago E. Argüello, and Don Pedro C. Carrillo, along
with others, were allied with the Americans. The cal-
ifornios who were still opposed asked her husband
to join them, which he did. Doña Felipa recalled that
those against the Americans were Leonardo Cota
and María Alipaz.34

Doña Felipa remembered that while she was in the
pueblo, californios continued to harass the American
troops from hiding places in the hills near the pueblo
and shouted “challenges, threats and insults.” Oth-
ers entered San Diego at night, and occasionally they
fired into the pueblo, on one occasion shooting Don
Pedrorena’s hat off. In late December 1846, the
Americans left San Diego to march on Los Angeles
to assist in the reconquest of that city. By then, the
daily harassing of San Diego by the californios had
stopped.35

After a time, her husband sent word to her to leave
San Diego and join him on their rancho. Felipa
recounted what happened:

We women, all of us left our houses and met in the
Estudillo adobe. The californios against the Ameri-
cans [los del país] approached the pueblo above the
fort that the Americans had built on the hill. I wanted
to leave to join my husband and I had sent a mes-
sage to Alipaz and Cota to come and get me. So they
sent my husband under a white flag thinking that
since he was such good friends with Pedrorena,
Argüello and Carrillo, they would let him pass. So
he approached under a white flag and Pedrorena and
a party of Americans rode to meet him—they took
his horse and arms and put him in jail. Since he was
detained several days without returning to the coun-
ytryside with me (Felipa), los del pais suspected that
he had gone over to the Americans and became very
angry with him. 36

Felipa “greatly feared the Americans who were not
disciplined soldiers,” and soon she and her husband
were allowed to leave after swearing that they would
not continue hostilities. They were given a safe con-
duct pass in case they were detained by other Amer-
ican troops. With their children, they fled San Diego
and returned to their rancho, where they found the
californios “furious with her husband,” accusing him
of working as a courier for the Americans. They even
threatened to shoot him. Instead they took the fam-
ily and all their horses as prisoners to another ran-
cho, Agua Herivida. Here the soldiers left Felipa and
their children and took Juan, her husband, along
with their Indian servants. Juan became sick and
they soon left him back on his rancho and let Felipa
also return. But every day the “fuerzas del pais”
descended on the rancho to take what they needed,
so that finally “most of what we had was taken from
us including the cattle that had been given to me by
Fr. Zalvidia.” 37

When the war ended, the family barely had
enough to eat, and some local californios continued
to accuse Felipa and her husband of being pro-
American. Their bad treatment finally forced the
Marrons to ask for protection from the American
commander of San Diego. After indications that
they would be welcome and not mistreated, they
departed for San Diego. Traveling with the Marron
party were several californio lancers who had been
at San Pascual, including Felipa’s brother Leandro,
who had killed an American in that conflict. On the
outskirts of the town, her husband raised a white
flag, and they entered the pueblo after leaving their
few remaining livestock outside. She reported that
some Americans in San Diego were angry at the
return of these former enemies but ultimately did
nothing.

The narration of Doña Felipa de Marron Osuna
is most interesting for its account of the Mexican War
period and the problems that her family had in
being loyal to Mexican California. They were sus-
pected of being pro-American, and eventually were
forced to be so. The details of the schism within the
californio ranks in San Diego provide invaluable
insight into this little-known period of the conflict.

It serves as a check on those historians who might
simplify the issue of loyalty during the war.

DISCOURSE AS HISTORY AND LITERATURE

The accounts of events given by Doña Josefa Car-
rillo de Fitch, Doña Apolinaria Lorenzana, Doña
Juana Machado de Ridington, and Doña Felipa
Osuna de Marron do not exhaust the historical pos-
sibilities. There are many other stories to tell about
this period, and indeed some of them are those of
heroes who asserted their rights as individuals
against a male patriarchy. Indeed, some may inter-
pret these women’s lives and reminiscences as evi-
dence that they were exemplary strong women or
that they took an activist role in the past. Josefa Car-
rillo de Fitch faced up to her father with incredible
bravery, and Felipa Osuna de Marron defied an
entire company of U. S. soldiers. Apolinaria Loren-
zano and Juana Machado de Ridington tended to
emphasize their memories about the native popu-
lation and the fears that all mexicanos felt about
Indian attacks.

The limited examples provided by these San
Diego women’s narratives improve our understand-
ing of the past by adding the dimension of gen-
der and by relating new information. There are
details reported by all these women that are not part
of any history of California or of San Diego, and they
touch on themes that are of contemporary interest.
Here, I am thinking of the recollections touching on
californio politics during the Mexican War. No his-
torian has yet fully investigated the complex social
and political changes during this period in south-
ern California. The californios’ divided loyalties, not
unlike those experienced by the tejanos in 1836, have
not been a subject for much research. Doña Felipa
Osuna de Marron provides evidence that loyalty to
Mexico during the war was interpreted by some cal-
ifornios in very personalistic terms. Whether or not
one’s friends were on the American side made a dif-
fERENCE. Her relation also illustrates how a loyal mex-
icanos was converted into an American supporter
because of the suspicions of his neighbors and
friends.

That personal loyalty was also important in Mex-
ican California is also demonstrated in the narra-
tives’ treatment of native relations. A faithful Indian
servant saved the lives of Doña Eustaquia and her
daughters on Rancho Jamul. Presumably disloyal
native servants threatened the San Diego pueblo in

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1837, and the result was a mini-witch hunt directed against suspected aliens. Mexican women were required to live intimately with people who could at any moment ally themselves with a horrible enemy, the unassimilated Indians, who would kill colonial men and take the women prisoner. As was true throughout California, the threat of Indian uprisings aided by the house servants was real, as demonstrated at Jamul. All of this is reminiscent of the fears, real and imagined, that white slave-owners in the deep South harbored towards their house slaves. There were, of course sexual implications to Indian attacks, as illustrated in the carrying off of the Leiva girls. This heightened the stakes, and perhaps added fuel to the male aggression against suspected natives.

In any case, the narratives’ treatment of Indian affairs in Mexican San Diego should disabuse us of the romantic notions of Mexican-Indian harmony. The slaughter of the eleven lancers in 1846 graphically challenges our suppositions of a natural alliance between californios and natives.

To what extent are these narratives a politically gendered history? The general topics covered were probably directed by the male interviewer, so it is impossible to tell the extent to which these women would have constructed a different thematic history on their own. The range of discourse in all the accounts, except perhaps that of Doña Carrillo de Fitch, suggests that the women had some control over the subject. Doña Machado conveyed a good memory about and interest in local politics, as did Doña Osuna to a lesser degree. Doña Lorenzana expressed sadness at the conquest of California by the Americans, and Doña Osuna voiced her fear of these newcomers. On the other hand, because the other two women, Doña Machado de Ridington and Doña Carrillo de Fitch, both married Anglo-Americans, their political loyalties were mixed at best.

The subtleties of tone and expression so well analyzed by Genaro Padilla in his study of Mexican Americans’ autobiographies were undoubtedly present in all of their accounts. These narratives, however, do not seem to be characterized by the romantic nostalgia of accommodation. The feeling one has for the past after reading Doña Osuna’s account is that of relief that it is over. Similarly, Doña Carrillo de Fitch’s story is that of a particularly trying affair, and the memories of Doña Machado are not exclusively those of an edenic past. Instead, danger seems to be a recurrent theme. Only Doña Lorenzana seems to have some romantic tendencies when she dwells on
the smooth running of the mission under her guidance. Perhaps it was a matter of personal pride, but not necessarily an attempt to reconstruct a happier time, and even she could remember the dangers they all faced from the native population. In general, we might say that memories of unpleasant events are often sharper than those of pleasant times: indeed revolutions, deaths, and wars are better remembered than periods of “boring” peace. These women’s memories were not filled with nostalgia, but with recollection of a past that was insecure and threatening.

Neither do these narratives seem to be good illustrations of what Padilla has called “discursive duplicity,” defined as a pragmatic attempt to please the conqueror while communicating a hidden message to future Mexican readers. The fact that these stories were dictated with the knowledge that they would be used by Bancroft to construct his history of California may have urged these women to assume a false tone or to hide a message, but it is difficult to find clear evidence of this in the texts. Of the four narratives, perhaps Doña Josefa Carrillo de Fitch’s may have been the most re-touched with respect to her direct quotes regarding what transpired between her and her father. The politicization of the encounter may have been a willful deception, but we can never know. Padilla points out how Doña Lorenzana’s refusal to discuss the loss of her ranch lands communicated her bitterness and anguish about what the Americans had done to her. It is entirely possible that she felt angry about this, but this tone did not pervade the rest of her narrative, and in fact, her memories of dispossession came at the end of the interview.

Finally, these narratives can be interpreted from the post-modern perspective that has been inspired by the French writers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. From a post-structuralist position, these accounts challenge conventional narratives of California history (those primarily constructed by the white men who dominated nineteenth-century society) because they accentuate hitherto silenced voices, those of conquered women. Deconstruction of these narratives shows how they can be read as oppositional texts, not so much by a literal reading but interpreting the silences, gaps, and nuances of meaning. Thus it is significant that husbands play such a minor role within all the narratives of the married women and that the most memorable men in their histories are the mission priests—and they are described as sick or crazy. Additionally, children and family life are virtually absent from the accounts of the married women. These silences might be interpreted as indicating the patriarchal assumptions of the interviewer, in this case Thomas Savage. Or, on the other hand, these women’s failure to mention “traditional Mexican family” life may indicate the extent to which it may have been over-valued and romanticized by later historians.

From a deconstructionist perspective, these historical stories told by women tell us something beyond the “facts” of what happened. Their accounts are in reality a form of literature that can be analyzed in terms of its symbolic, or figurative, meanings, which are intended to condition the way we should think about the past. In historian Hayden White’s words, “the historical narrative does not reproduce the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences. The historical narrative does not image the things it indicates; it calls to mind images of the things it indicates, in the same way that a metaphor does.” From this viewpoint, the women’s narratives provide various metaphors that signify a context for a deeper understanding of the historical events. An analysis of the symbolic content of these narratives is inevitably drawn to the metaphors of the “Other,” in particular the ambivalent image of the native American and the Anglo-Americans, both as allies and enemies. There is no clear code for deciphering the multivalent meaning of these two groups: some individuals were good and some were bad. Indeed it is noticeable that negative stereotypes about national or racial groups are absent from these narratives. Natives and American conquerors are treated as individuals who had moral significance to the degree that they hurt or helped particular californios. Thus Doña Osuna de Marron does not express moral outrage over californios who changed sides during the Mexican War—they did so because of personal friendships. Similarly, Doña Lorenzana tells of her approval of the American administrator of Mission San Luis Rey, even while feeling sad about the American conquest. If there is any literary modality through which these narratives are encoded, it is that of irony. The ironic tone is imbedded in the shifting meaning of the word “enemy.” Depending on the time, circumstance, and individual narrator, the “enemy” could be a former native servant, a former mission neophyte, the indios from the surrounding country, a californio politico, a Mexican governor, los del país (californio rancheros and vaque-
A Native American couple, probably of the Kumeyaay people, near a ranchería in the San Diego backcountry, about 1874. By this time the Indians had adopted some of the European styles of construction, which they blended with their traditional materials. San Diego Historical Society, Photograph Collection.

ros), individuals in the American army, or an Anglo-American settler. On the other hand, all these individuals could also be friends and collaborators.

The more thorough analysis of these historical narratives as forms of literature is a subject for another, more specialized kind of study. In this inquiry, the historical sketches recorded by nineteenth-century Mexican women defy easy categorization. Their accounts are not transparent windows giving us a clear view of events. Instead, their vision of history is colored and rendered opaque by the women’s ambivalent and marginalized status. It should be evident that the significance of their historical voices goes beyond the easy characterizations of activist or victim. Their expressions were complex and nuanced, and ultimately provide a more authentic understanding of the Mexican heritage of the United States.

See notes beginning on page 355.

Richard Griswold del Castillo along with Richard A. Garcia has written Cesar Chavez: The Triumph of Spirit, recently published by the University of Oklahoma Press. Griswold del Castillo is also author of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict (1990), and several other books dealing with Chicano social history.