

THE ROMANCE OF RANCHO REALTY

BY J. M. GUINN

The office of a County Recorder would be about the last place a sentimentalist would look for romance, and yet in many of the dry-as-dust tomes stacked on the shelves of our County Recorder's office there are the elements of romances unwritten and of tragedies unacted.

Many a conveyance of realty has been signed in tears as the ancestral acres of the grantor have passed to strangers. Hope has died in many a heart when the foreclosed mortgage has transferred the loved home to rapacious creditors. Between the lines in many a record you may read the Shylock bond for a pound of flesh cut from nearest the heart of the unfortunate whose pressing necessities compels him to pay excessive usury. Even in the real estate booms that come periodically in the development of our Western cities and towns there are romantic episodes and events that might be developed into volumes of fiction.

It is interesting and sometimes pathetic to watch the encroachments of a growing city upon the surrounding country. The expanding city reaches the boundaries of a baronial estate that for generations has belonged to the descendants of an olden time family. The last owner for a time holds out against all importunities to sell his patrimony, but seductive offers tempt him and the ancestral acres are transferred to the real estate promoter for subdivision.

The manor house of the estate may obstruct the extension of a street or interfere with the subdivision into lots. If so, it is removed or razed to the ground and the ploughshare may pass over its site. The new owners may not, like the olden time conquerors of rival cities, sow salt on its ruins, yet the family legends, traditions and romances that have clustered around it for generations are as rudely dispelled—as completely obliterated—as if the plough had passed over its site for the sowing of a crop of salt.

The ancestral acres that have passed from father to son for successive generations are cut into lots and the city builds over its new accession, then passes beyond to absorb other lands.

During the Spanish and Mexican domination in California our city was not aggressive. In its first century under the successive rule of three nations, its business district moved southward from the plaza to First street—less than half a mile. In the three decades of its second century it has moved quite compactly for three miles and the residence portion has leaped over the old pueblo limits of four square leagues and spread out beyond at irregular intervals over a hundred square miles.

Subdivision of acreage into city lots has been a profitable industry to a number of our people for the past decade. The romancing that has originated in real estate offices during that time would fill volumes, but unlike the old-time novel that was always founded on fact, the real estate romances are mostly founded on fiction that is retailed as fact.

The huge volumes that annually originate in the Assessor's office and find a final lodgment in the County Auditor's office, contain little of the romantic. They are filled with Gradgrindian records of facts that are not appreciated by the taxpayer. They record the penalties that we pay for civilization and its accessories—the amount that each owner of real estate or personal property must contribute for the privilege of being governed.

Before the Gringos possessed California, there was no compilation of Assessors' Libraries, nor were there any of those tragicomedies that are now enacted every spring-time when the Assessor's deputies try to extort from unwilling taxpayers facts in regard to their possessions—facts to fill these huge volumes.

There were no assessors in the Mexican scheme of local government.

The transition from the Mexican form of raising revenue to the American method forms an interesting and it may be said a little known chapter of our local history.

The adjustment of the native Californian to the methods of his conquerors was gradual. Doubtless there were romantic episodes in the process of that adjustment, but they have not been recorded and all that remains to us is a few facts. I have culled some of these from the old records, and from these pieced out a story of olden time methods of assessing and the real estate values of that time; comparing these values with our present the reader might well accuse me of romancing.

Under the rule of Spain and Mexico in California, there was no assessment of real estate for the purpose of taxation. Tariff on goods imported, fines for drunkenness and other vices, licenses for

dances, for saloons, for stores, for cock pits, bull rings and such provided the revenue for municipal expenses. Men's pleasures and vices paid the cost of governing.

The pueblo's expenses were light. The only salaried officials were the secretary of the ayuntamiento and the schoolmaster. The highest salary paid the secretary was \$40 per month. In addition to his duties as secretary of the council, he acted as alcalde's clerk. The schoolmaster's pay was fixed at \$15 per month. According to the syndico's (tax collector's) books, the largest municipal revenue collected in any one year was \$1000. The syndico and the alcalde received fees for their services. All this was changed when the Americans took possession of the offices; and they were not backward in coming forward when there were offices to fill.

In the first list of the officers of Los Angeles county the names of only two native Californians appear—Don Agustin Olvera, County Judge, and Don Antonio F. Coronel, County Assessor. Coronel was elected assessor at the first county election, which was held April 1, 1850. As nine-tenths of the inhabitants of the newly created county of Los Angeles understood the Spanish language only it was highly necessary to have some one who spoke their language to explain to them the new system of taxation introduced by the conquerors.

Don Antonio's first assessment was made in 1851. He prepared no roll. The assessment was made on loose sheets that have been lost. The total valuation of property footed up \$2,882,949.

The assessment roll for 1852 has been preserved. It is written in Spanish and has a fanciful title page—a work of the penman's art. Don Antonio did not order a number of great leather-bound volumes machine-ruled for his assessment. He made his assessment roll himself, binding, ruling and all. It consists of unruled sheets of Spanish foolscap pasted together into leaves two feet long and stitched into a book of 30 pages, covered with blue calico. This one book contained the entire assessment for that year, also the poll tax list.

The following are the principal items of that assessment:

Number of acres assessed.....	1,505,180
Value of real estate	\$748,606
Value of improvements	301,947
Value of personal property.....	1,183,898
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Total	\$3,234,451

The county at that time contained over thirty million acres, and only about one in twenty was assessed. The average value was

less than 50 cents an acre. The county then extended from San Juan Capistrano on the south to the Tulares and Death Valley on the north, and from the Pacific ocean to the Colorado river. Don Antonio's district exceeded in extent the aggregate area of five New England states. By far the larger part of its inhabitants were "Indians not taxed." It is not probable that Don Antonio traveled over the vast territory of the thinly-populated county. Los Angeles was the only city in the county and doubtless the inhabitants, like those in the days of old, when Herod was reducing the infant population of Judea—"went up to the city to be taxed."

Don Antonio was economical in the use of paper and ink. He did not write out lengthy involved descriptions by metes and bounds of the realty he described for assessment.

Here is a sample entry that considering the large amount involved has perhaps never been exceeded in brevity on an assessment roll:

"Eulogio De Celis—100,000 acres—Rancho Ex-Mission San Fernando—value \$12,500. Also 60 acres—huerto (orchard)—Angeles—Value, \$700

(The Rancho was assessed at one *real*, or 12½ cents an acre.)

"Value of personal property, horses and cattle, \$14,000."

The cruelty of fate decreed that in less than two score years later the son and heir to this baronial estate that would for vastness turn an English Lord green with envy should die penniless.

The American in California had already proved his ability as a land grabber. Another entry reads: Enrique (Henry) Dalton—45,280 acres—Santa Anita Rancho—Value, \$10,223; also 205 acres—huerto—Angeles—Value, \$1,000. The Santa Anita is the rancho made famous in the annals of horse racing by the late Lucky Baldwin. It is now in the process of disintegration.

Another Baldwin Rancho—La Cienega—then owned by the Abilas and assessed at \$1,000, recently changed owners at seven million dollars, and is gradually being absorbed into the city.

Juan Froster—English born—manifested the traditional land hunger of the Briton in the acquisition of three ranchos aggregating 76,000 acres, which Don Antonio valued at \$17,293. Don Juan came to California before the Gringos and had a better opportunity to acquire real estate.

Don Manuel Garfias, owner of the Rancho San Pasqual on which that city of millionaires—Pasadena—is now built, was listed for \$3,200 on 12,600 acres. The Rancho really contained 13,600 acres but Don Antonio did not consider the land on the mesa and the banks of the Arroyo Seco where multi-millionaires have since built

their castles worth assessing even at *dos reales* or 25 cents an acre. Garfias in 1853 mortgaged the Rancho for \$3,000 at 5 per cent a month, interest compounded monthly, to complete and furnish a Casa Grande (grand house) he was building. He was a right royal entertainer and a jolly good fellow, but the fates were against him. That cancerous mortgage ate into his income day and night and he never could get enough ahead to cancel it or even to meet the interest. After struggling along for nearly a decade he gave up and the magnificent rancho, worth today fifty million dollars, changed owners by the foreclosure of that beggarly mortgage of \$3,000 and accrued interest. Such were some of the realities that took the romance out of the rancheros. The rancheros of many acres were optimists, they trusted the future. Mañana—to-morrow—would exorcise all evils. Why worry? But the glamour of romance that glistened life on the old time ranchos was often dispelled by the Shylock bond of the usurer that knew no tomorrow, that trusted no mañana for payment.

There were no millionaires in the old pueblo days. Juan Temple, the builder of the Temple Block, was the richest man in Los Angeles County in 1852. His assessment footed up \$108,000. He owned the Cerritos Rancho, containing 20,000 acres, which Coronel valued at \$7,500. The city of Long Beach is located on this rancho. An acre in the suburbs of that city would today sell for more than the rancho's 20,000 acres, sixty years ago.

Julius Verdugo was the largest land holder in the county in the early '50's. He was the owner of the magnificent Rancho San Rafael, containing according to Don Antonio, 114,000 acres, and assessed at \$24,000. It lies north and west of Los Angeles city and extending to the Arroyo Seco at Pasadena. The city of Glendale, the towns of Tropic and Eagle Rock, and the Los Angeles city suburbs of Highland Park and Garvanza, are located on this rancho. It is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, ranchos in Los Angeles County. It was granted October 20, 1784, by Governor Fages to Jose Maria Verdugo. It is a genuine Spanish grant. Most of the so-called Spanish grants were made by Mexican governors.

Don Antonio estimated the Island of Santa Catalina to contain 95,000 acres, and assessed the acreage at \$6,000, about $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents, or half a *real*, an acre. The island then was heavily stocked with wild goats. These were considered of little value and it was impossible to list them for assessment. Many years ago an Argonaut of the fall of '49, or spring of '50, told me a weird tale of disaster that befell a number of those same goats that Don Antonio failed to enumerate for assessment. In the early mining days it was difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the miners in the camps lo-

cated high up in the Sierras to procure fresh meat and scurvy sometimes broke out in those camps. A speculative genius conceived the idea of capturing a band of those Catalina wild goats and driving them up into the mountain mining camps to furnish the miners with fresh meat. The goats were good climbers and could easily scale the mountains where cattle could not go.

He hired a squad of vaqueros and crossed over to the island. They succeeded in corralling quite a herd of goats. These they loaded on barges and brought them over to the mainland and started to drive the herd up country.

The climate of the mainland did not agree with the goats, it was too hot and dry; when they arrived at that land of sunshine, the Mojave desert, they were "tuckered out." They were urged on. When the speculator reached the opposite side of the desert with the forlorn hope of his flock there was a trail of dead goats behind from the Tehachapi range to Rabbit Springs. To use a modern slang phrase, the desert "got his goat." Out of pocket, utterly disgusted and cursing his folly, he abandoned the few survivors of his flock to their fate and then disappeared from the Land of the Afternoon.

Such was the tale told me long ago by an Argonaut of '49, as we sat by a camp fire in the gloaming of an autumn evening. It may have been a reality or it may be mere romance. Who knows? Those Argonauts—those searchers after the golden fleece of Phryxus' ram—were noted for their romancing—for their vivid imaginings for their erratic memories. They often cruelly imposed upon the credulity of new arrivals.

But to return from this digression. The vast ranchos into which California was divided in early days have disappeared from our maps. Subdivisions and resubdivisions have destroyed their identity. Few of the new comers can tell in what rancho their recently acquired realty is located. With but very few exceptions not an acre of the vast areas of land that Don Antonio assessed sixty years ago, to the land rich rancheros is owned now by their descendants. Gone, all gone, to the Gringos.

The Assessor's report for the fiscal year of 1856 is the first one in which the city valuation is segregated from the county:

Value of city real estate.....	\$187,582
Value of city improvements.....	457,535
Value of personal property.....	1,213,079

Total\$1,858,196

The assessed valuation of personal property was nearly double the aggregate of the real estate and improvements in the city.

The first board of county supervisors was elected June 14, 1852, and one of its first acts was to sit as a board of equalization. The process of equalizing by that board differed somewhat from the methods of our present board and city council. The members of that first board of equalization equalized mainly by "argumenting" as they called it, the number of cattle and horses owned by some of the rancheros, who evidently had failed to count correctly the number of animals they owned. One ranchero had 250 wild horses added to his band at \$10 each. The supervisors corralled and added to the assessment roll over a thousand wild horses. Another cattle king had a thousand cattle added to his herd on the roll at \$12 each.

But the most singular lapse of memory from the viewpoint of today was that of the land baron, who guessed 800 acres short of the true amount of land he owned. As it was worth only "two bits" an acre or a trifle of \$200, it was not strange that he forgot it. Today, the owners of that forgotten realty would scorn an offer of a thousand dollars an acre.

The first Board of Supervisors has left this stigma upon the educational qualifications of one of the early assessors:

"Be it hereby ordered that inasmuch as the Board of Supervisors is satisfied that in the Assessor's list some of the names of taxpayers are so badly spelled that it is impossible to identify them, that the Assessor be required to correct the same for the Auditor, and as many who have English names have not been listed, the Assessor be required to appoint some suitable person who is acquainted with these people and understands English to collect poll tax and assess the amount of their property for each of the Townships of El Monte, San Gabriel and Los Angeles for a supplementary list to be returned on the first Monday of October, 1854."

If property values were low the tax rate was proportionately low. The rate for 1852, city and county combined, was \$1 on the hundred and the school tax 3 cents on the hundred.

Although in the early '50s it is alleged that crime was rampant in the old pueblo, it did not cost very much to control, or at least punish the criminal element. The district attorney's salary was \$1150 a year. The jailer was allowed \$6 a day for his services, and the following items from his bill for December, 1852, give the cost of feeding and warming the prisoners: Candles for 31 days, \$31; feeding prisoners, \$10; rawhides, \$8; wood, \$10. To one not acquainted with the customs of old pueblo days it may seem strange that it cost almost as much for rawhides as for food for the prisoners. The rawhides reduced the cost of feeding the culprits. They were used mostly on the Indian prisoners, although sometimes a white man was decorated with stripes. It was useless to fine an

Indian for his transgressions, as he never had any money. It was worse than useless to imprison him; he enjoyed prison life and grew fat on prison fare. The only punishment he feared was a whipping. His sentence was so many lashes, or if his offense was great and the penalty heavy, he was given a certain number of lashes and then sold to the highest bidder and compelled to work out the balance of his sentence at "four bits" a day.

Property values increased very slowly in early times and there were periods of retrogression.

The assessment for 1856 footed up \$2,490,000; that of 1866, \$2,350,000—a decrease of \$140,000 in 10 years. The decade between those dates was a period of the greatest depression the county has ever known. The great drouth of 1863 and 1864, when for two years there was scarcely sufficient rain to sprout the grass, swept \$2,000,000 from the assessment roll in the loss of horses, cattle and sheep starved to death. After the loss of their stock the land owners were left without resources and land almost ceased to have any value.

The assessments of real estate then, in view of the high price of the same property now, seem almost farcical. A judgment for \$4070 on account of delinquent taxes of 1863 was entered against the richest man in the county and all his real estate advertised for sale at public auction, December 12, 1864. The magnificent rancho Los Alamitos, containing 26,000 acres, adjoining the city of Long Beach, was offered for sale on account of unpaid taxes amounting to \$152, a sum that would not purchase the fractional part of an acre in it today. The rancho Bolsa Chica, containing 9000 acres, was offered for sale on account of unpaid taxes amounting to \$27.34.

But of all the vast landed possessions of that great cattle baron aggregating 200,000 acres, advertised for sale 46 years ago on account of unpaid taxes, the least valued parcel then is the most valuable now. This consisted of four Ord survey lots, 120x165 feet each, located respectively on the northwest and southwest corners of Main and Fifth streets; the southwest corner of Spring and Fifth and the southeast corner of Fort (Broadway), and Fourth streets. These magnificent business corners, worth today \$4,000,000, were offered at sheriff's sale December 12, 1864, for the beggarly sum of \$2.52 unpaid taxes and there were no takers. The tax on each lot was 63 cents and the assessed value 25 cents a front foot, or \$30 a lot.

Property values advanced slowly during the '60s and '70s. In July, 1881, 30 years ago, the lot on the northwest corner of Spring and Sixth streets sold for \$1500. Its assessed valuation was about

\$500, an amount that would not buy a front inch of it now, even if the 12-story skyscraper that stands on it were removed.

No people in the world's history, perhaps, ever grew rich so rapidly on assessment rolls as we have done in the past 10 or 11 years. In 1898, the total assessment of the county was \$93,256,089. In 1909, it was \$593,861,497—an increase of a few hundred thousands over \$500,000,000 in 11 years.

No more convincing object lesson could be given to illustrate our wonderful growth than to pile up the 71 huge volumes in which the taxable wealth of our county is written this year and on the top of this stack, the tax books of Orange and San Bernardino counties, those of part of Riverside and half of Kern—all of which territory was a part of Los Angeles county when Don Antonio Coronel on his trusty mustang traversed this vast area, seeking whom he might assess; then against this sky-scraper of tax rolls place the little blue calico-covered book in which Don Antonio wrote down the estimated wealth of the Dons and Donas of 60 years ago. On that stack of tax rolls—that Tower of Terror to the taxpayers—might be written the motto of a mercantile house, "Watch us grow."