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THE CHRYSOPOLIS

BEAR FLAG REVOLT

CARRIZA PLAINS

A DAIRY "CROSSING THE PLAINS"

On file at the San Luis Obispo County Historical Society, SLO

THE CALIFORNIA TRAVELER

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COVER: This house, in the Carriza Plains, was once the residence of Frank and Jesse James when they visited their uncle in California.

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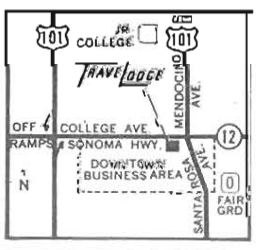


The old and new

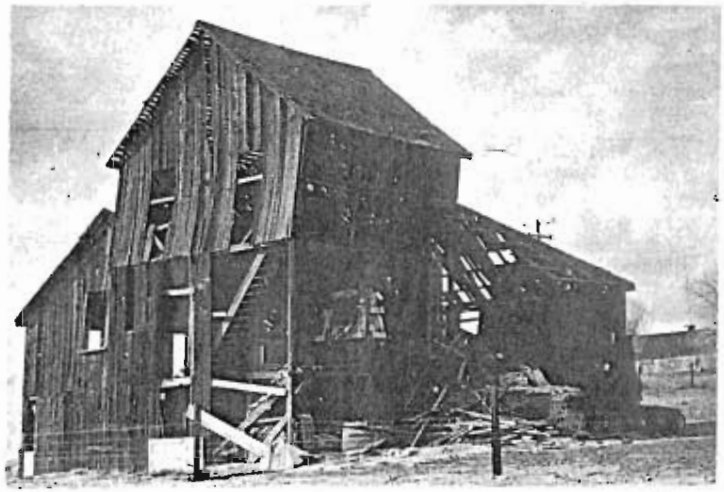
CARRIZA PLAINS

By Dennis Gardner

If a traveler could know the historical significance of an area over which he drives, or could find time to stop at some of the spots which have seen tragedies, murders, gold discoveries, or strange Indian ceremonials, he might find his journey much more interesting. Such for instance would be the trip over the once remote semi-arid Carrisa Plain, in San Luis Obispo County of Central California, along Highway #56. If you had come by horseback, oxcart or covered wagon about the time of Statehood in 1850 or the Gold Rush days of the 1850's, or even as late as the La Pazna gold rush on the Carrisa Plains, and climbed the depressing and barren Temblor Range from Bakersfield or McKittrick areas of Kern County, you would have looked down on a lush fertile plain, almost level with slightly rolling hills covered with huge live oaks, and tall wild oats and a heavy reed grass called Carrizo. You would have seen thousands of antelope, deer and wild long-horned cattle grazing. If you had explored the chapparal-covered mountainous areas, you might have encountered mountain lions, grizzly bears, or elaborately painted caves and rocks covered with Indian pictrographs (See California Traveler, Sept. 1966, Chumash Picture Writing).

As you descended to the base of the Temblors you would come to the wide earth-crack which is said to be the source of most California earthquakes, the San Andreas fault.

Stretching to your left, or south of the trail almost as far as your eye could see would be the vast land grant of J. Garcia, a prosperous Californio who lived in the elegant Spanish Grandee style of the times. Like his cousins across the treacherous grades of the Santa Lucia mountains along the coastal areas he, and his several sons, wore brocades', velvets and elaborately emboridered clothing, with gold and silver ornaments on his hats, and on his horses' saddles and bridles. His wife and daughters wore silks and satins, jewels, and even satin slippers. They lived in a large ranch house typical of those gracious days, with many Indain servants, and even imported tutors for his children. There were many vaqueros to attend his immense herds of cattle and sheep. His ranch was called El Saucito from the little willows which grew around the spring.



The old Hubbard Mill just east of the old Simmler site. Millstones came from Europe as ballast in a sailing ship.

Closer to you, next to the road, now #58, stretches another vast tract even then called the El Chicote Rancho (grass rope) after the manilla rope in use for riatas by the cowboys. This also was a part of the old Spanish grandee tradition, and is the land which was leased by the famed cattle barons, Miller and Lux, for grazing cattle to drive northward to feed the hungry miners. It was leased for 5¢ an acre. Today the development company gets almost a thousand dollars per acre.

To your right immediately north of your road, stretches the vast 42,000 acre Civil War Grant to Captain McDonald, an old sea captain who bought his land for government script at 25¢ per acre after seeing a tax-sale in a newspaper printed at San Luis Obispo, the County seat. This was about the time of a terrible drought in which ranchers were losing their cattle by the thousands from starvation, around 1862 to 1864. Many of the Spanish grandees lost their lands as well, as they had mortgaged them to money lenders, sometimes at the scandalous rates of 6% to 10% per month. They either had to sell or get out. This is how many small landholders, farmers, and sheep herders obtained possession of the lands about this time, as well as the great land speculators

As you drive into the Plain about six miles from the Fault, you will come to the spot marked Simmler

This dairy barn was built by Dr. Thomas W. Still during the La Panza Gold Rush.

on your map, and if you are looking for travelers accomodations, do not despair. Just turn south at the big sign which says "California Valley" and drive about two miles where you will come upon the surprise of your life.

Here you will find a virtual oasis with a modern service station, fine new motel with heated swimming pool, a restaurant with cocktail lounge, a general store, post office, and a community center building. You will also see if you look about, a two-strip airfield, with perhaps several planes upon it. Some weekends such groups as Flying Farmers or others fly in for conferences, conventions or just for a few hours of fun and frolic, or a gourmet-type meal at the Inn.

On occasions of California Valley's annual birthday or Fly-In Celebrations, there have been as many as 200 planes in one day and 20,000 to 25,000 people flying or driving in for the buffalo barbeques. Their next Fly-In will be in September this year.

If you are interested in the Painted Rock, perhaps you can get permission from the present owners of the ranch by that name to inspect the huge natural amphitheatre once used as an elaborately decorated ceremonial room by unknown Indian tribes of perhaps 400 to a 1000 years ago. During our early-settler time it was used as a sheep corral for about 4000 sheep.

The first white man to obtain possession of the Painted Rock Ranch was Chester Brumley, who built a fine home for its day, brought his wife and two daughters to live in high style, also with tutors for music and art, planted gardens, orchards, vineyards, and ran sheep and cattle. There was a whim well on the place, a mechanical contrivance where a huge drum with winding cable to which horses were hitched, drew up water in barrels.

Also near the painted rock, just westward in the hills, live blind scorpions and some gold nuggets were found in early gold prospecting days. Today vast wheatlands surround the place, and one can get in only at certain times of the year.

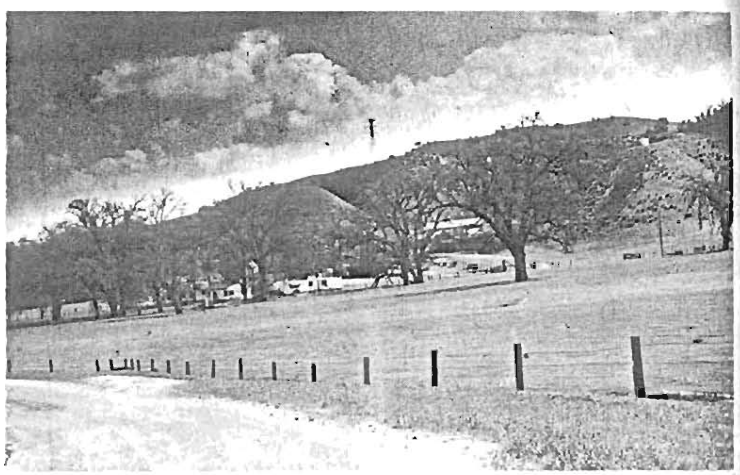
Going back to the junction at the site of Old Simmler, you probably noticed a tall 4-story building in tumbled - down condition on the north side of the road. This was a flour mill erected by a former Methodist minister turned farmer, A. F. Hubbard, using millstones brought from Europeby boat around Good Hope. Mr. Hubbard was the man who founded Simmler Post Office, naming it after the San Luis Obispo postmaster who helped him get it.

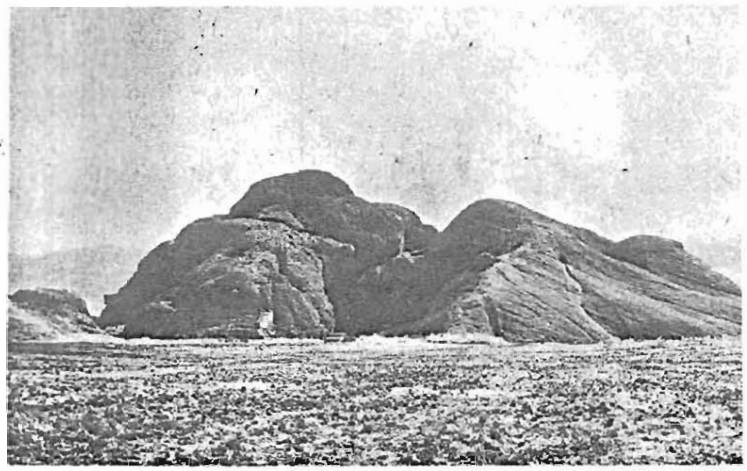
Mr. Hubbard and his son Sam were considered radical andqueer sort of persons, because they believed that some day people would fly. They even built a model of an airship which combined the principles of a dirigible and a propeller-driven airplane. Engineers at Berkely and Los Angeles Universities told him it should work, and a corporation was formed in 1902 to build it. However, Mr. Hubbard's death in 1903 put an end to his dreams.

You will note that all this land seems to be devoted to wheat or barley in the central part of the plain. The land is dry-farmed, by allowing half the land to lie idle every second year, in order accululate more of the 8 to 12 inches of rain averaged per year. The wheat grown is either Baart or Ramona, a highly prized hard wheat for processing dry cereals and for food supplement products because of its high quality and quanity of easily digested protein; and especially for its gluten properties which make it adaptible for macaroni, spagetti and noodles.

May and June are the critical months when the grain is in the "boot", and farmers can almost predict their harvested yield.

The La Panza Ranch appears much today as it did when founded in the 1860's.





Painted Rock is a huge, sandstone cone rising from the Carriza Plain. Indian tribes performed ceremonials here, left picture paintings 400 to 100 years old.

The King family purchased some of the old McDonald properties way back in the early days, and it was they who were the first to try summer-fallowing.

The Van Maitre family after the great droughts of the early days were the first to take up timber-culture in the Plains, and had their ranch and home at the southern end of the Plain. They also started dairying, with the milk and cream being shipped by Parcel Post to McKittrick once the mail route was established.

Five Cavanaugh brothers earlier, went to a ranch named the Buckhorn, in the southern end of the plain. In 1893 they brought the first mechanized harvester into the plains, and their descendents still farm and raise cattle today.

The waters of the southcentral part of the plains drain into Soda Lake which in summer dries up to reveal a crystalized bed of soda, salt and gypsum, which was once used for both human and livestock consumption and for fertilizing alkali lands.

During about November and December, huge flocks of Sand Cranes fly down from Alaska to winter here. Their 4 - foot wingspread gives an impressive sight as they congregate to fly back northward at a certain time, almost darkening the sky as they take off together.

Once in a while a California Condor can be seen on the Carrisa Plain when an extra strong gust of wind carries that biggest flying bird in the world northward from its refuge just south of Carrisa's boundary, the Caliente Range.

As you travel on westward you'll be between two more of the largest and most famous ranches on the plain, the Carrisa and the San Juan Capistrano, both famed in legend and fact for over a hundred years. The San Juan stretched over 20 miles along the San Juan River which drains the north and western side of the Plain to the north toward Shandon.

Some 15 miles or so from the Simmler-California Valley junction you will come to another junction on #58 where the pavement for the newer portion swings northward toward Santa Margarita, but the old crumbling blacktop leads a short distance southwestward to the even more famed La Panza Ranch which once belonged to Drury W. James, uncle of the outlaws, Jesse and Frank James. These young men visited Drury and his young bride Louisa about the time of the Civil War, and lived for a time on the La Panza with them. Drury himself built the stone and abode home, but she soon pled with him to take her to Paso Robles where rattlesnakes, outlaws, lions and bears were not quite so plentiful, and where her sister was married to a man developing the mineral springs resort there. Drury and his partner Thompson sold out, and Thompson gave Louisa a check for $10,000 as a farewell present. Thus was money easy-come and easy-go in those days. The old house is gone now, but the modern ranch - house establishment still exists, and the 23,000 acre LaPanza is still famed for its round-up and rodeo times as well as its fine cattle.

A little farther on, the old road will take you near the site of the LaPanza gold find of 1877, and the old site of Dr. Still's post office, store and inn, the hub of the mining enterprise for many years afterward.

But unless you are interested in exploring the old placers, looking for old bottles, or camping along the Navajo Creek where 400 or more miners sifted the placer sands for several years, you are advised not to take this road, as it is becoming more and more full of holes and weakened foundations from the severe rains of this past winter. There is a Forestry Ranger station between this junction and

The California Valley Carriza Inn, Post Office and General Store is part of a newly booming area.

the camp grounds in the Los Padres Forest Reserve where one should inquire as to the safety ahead. (See Sept 66 issue, California Traveler).

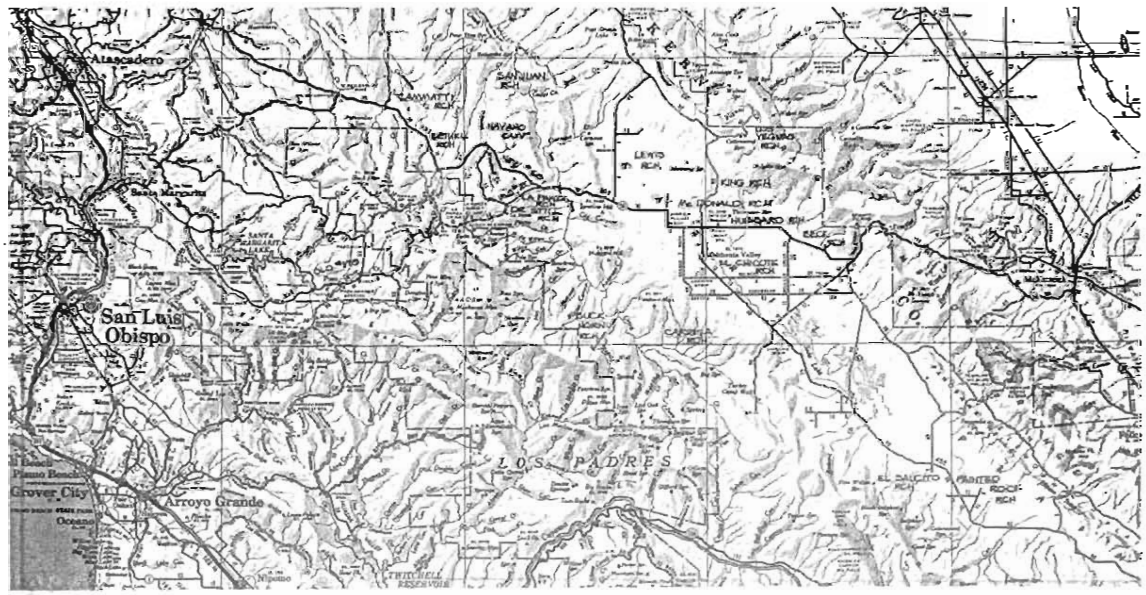
Rather, you will take the fast new portion of #58 which sweeps northwestward through the old San Juan rangelands where the cowboys were rough and tough, and where a special breed of horses called Chapo, meaning chunky, were raised; and up past the Cammati Ranch where its early owner, John Gilkey, was murdered by outlaws in cold blood after they had eaten with him and spent the night partaking of his hospitality; past French Camp where two French settlers were also murdered by the same California outlaw band while one's wife looked on, and from whom they took $2700 in gold before the leader attempted to dispose of her.

Another neighbor, Walter Lewis who had built a home on the Navajo Creek in the 1850's escaped the murderers. Later he became foreman of the Cammati, later yet obtained some 30,000 cares on which his descendants are farmer-ranchers to this day.

Wild horses also abounded in these mountainous areas in the old days, and a few still roam the remoter parts of the forest, and on the Bethel Ranch near the Cammati.

Two and 3-day riding parties are organized to go on excursions into this country of the wild horses by the California Valley Stables which maintain fine horses for hire.

The Community Building is on the site of the original El Chicote Ranch, once leased by Miller and Lux for five cents per acre.

By this time you are well toward the north of Santa Margarita Lake where it starts at the headwaters of the Salinas River. The old trails at the junction lead northward up Cammati Canyon to Shandon, or westward along California Canyon to Santa Margarita, and to the old ranch of that name which was an outpost of the San Luis Obispo Mission in the early days. Your new road will take you directly along main street of Santa Margarita and into #101 (El Camion Real) where you are almost exactly half way between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Map of the Carriza Plains shows location of old ranchers.