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In the Beginning

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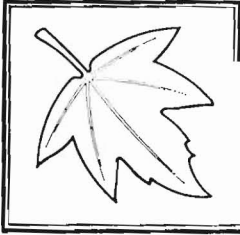


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On Friday, 28 July 1769, members of the Gaspar de Portolá Expedition on their way from the port of San Diego de Alcalá to Monterey camped on the left bank of a rather broad river where mass was celebrated. Because it was St. Anne's day they called the river the Santa Ana; the location of the camp was near the present-day city of Olive in Orange Co.¹ Fray Juan Crespi noted in his diary that on the right bank of the river there was a populous village of Indians who received them with great friendliness.¹ The Indians were undoubtedly those later known as the Gabrielinos who occupied a considerable area in what is now Orange and Los Angeles counties.² Crespi commented about the bed of the river being well grown with sycamores, alders, willows and other trees which they had not recognized. He noted from the sand on its banks that in the rainy season the river must be subject to great floods. He also correctly observed that there was a great deal of land which could easily be irrigated.¹

On the same day the area was shaken by four violent earthquakes which marked the beginning of recorded earthquake history in California.³ It is reported that the heavy shaking threw the river out of its channel and many men and horses were thrown to the ground. Because of the earthquake, Crespi named the river, Rio Jesús de los Temblores.¹

With Portolá on that eventful day in 1769 was a young Spanish soldier who was later to play an important role in the history of what was to become Orange Co.⁴ His name was José Antonio Yorba. Antonio, one of Fages's original Catalonian volunteers had been in Mexico for two years at the time he enlisted in the Holy Expedition of Galvez, or the Portolá Expedition of 1769, which was to bring the Christian faith to the Indians and to save Alta California for Spain. In 1797, after some 25 years or more in the army, Antonio retired as an invalid sergeant, "sargento invalido." While still in the service he had married María Josefa Grijalva, daughter of Pablo Grijalva who had come to California as a sergeant under Juan Bautista de Anza at the time that de Anza had brought his group of settlers from Sonora, Mexico, across the deserts and mountains to California. María Josefa's sister, María del Carmen became the wife of another soldier, Pedro Peralta. Grijalva and Yorba together entered into cattle ranching some-

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where along the Santa Ana River, probably before 1800, although no definite record exists. In 1810, Antonio Yorba was the grantee, with his wife's nephew, Juan Pablo Peralta, of what was first called Rancho Santiago, then Rancho Santa Ana, and finally Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana.⁴ The grant was made by Governor José Joaquín de Arrillaga and it was the only Spanish land grant made in the area.⁵ The grant was for land lying south and east of the Santa Ana River.

Antonio and María Josefa Yorba had 13 children, six boys and seven girls. At the time of Antonio's death in 1825, four boys were alive and he named young Bernardo, third son in point of age, and José María Berdugo as executors of his will which had been executed in the mission of San Juan Capistrano in July 1824.⁵ It is recorded that not knowing how to write he had made the sign of the cross. The estate was left to his widow and four sons and the executors were to receive the sum of five dollars each for the trouble they would have in administering it.

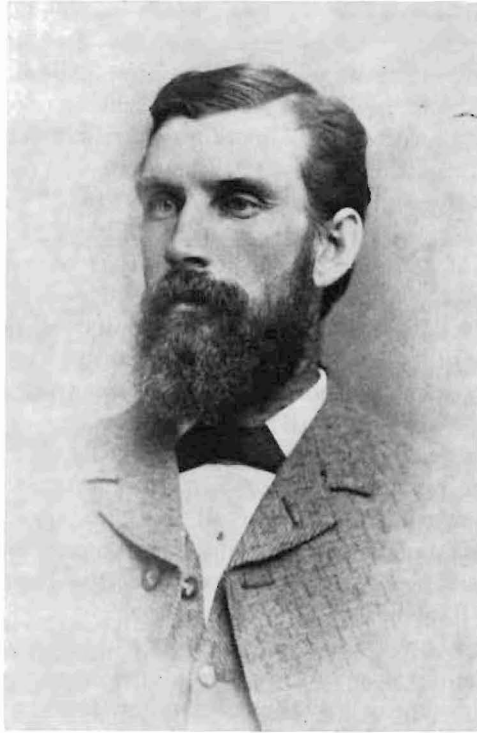
As an heir to the ranch property of his father, Antonio Yorba, Bernardo seems always to have had the use of all the land he wanted for farming but the desire for a rancho of his own appears to have brought a decision on his part to secure the property lying north of the Santa Ana River that became known as Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana.⁴

Early in the 1830's with secularization of the missions underway, the Mexican government was taking land from the missions and giving it to men who would develop cattle ranches. One of the first to take advantage of the new policy was Bernardo Yorba who made formal application for Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana.⁴ Immediately came a protest from the Mission San Gabriel who claimed that they had always used the area north of the Santa Ana River for pasturage of mission herds and further that the Mission had a rancho station on the land. Nevertheless, in 1834, José Figueroa, Governor of California, Republic of Mexico, granted Bernardo Yorba "three leagues of land, more or less," lying north of the Santa Ana River. Over the years Bernardo continued to acquire land far up the river into what is now Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Bernardo's holdings later constituted one of the largest cattle properties ever known in southern California.

When in 1848, California, by terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, became a part of the United States, the United States agreed to accept Mexican land titles; however, years were to pass before many of them were cleared. It is reported that no will ever written within the confines of what is now Orange County has figured so largely in afterevents in court as has the will of Bernardo Yorba who died in 1858.⁴

In 1866 a patent was granted by the United States and signed by President

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John William Bixby (1848–1887)

Andrew Johnson confirming the Mexican Grant of Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana to Bernardo Yorba and his heirs.⁶

John William Bixby, son of Simon Bixby and Deborah Norton Flint Bixby was born at Anson, Maine, on 25 May 1848.⁷ The American progenitor of the family, Joseph Bixby, had emigrated to the United States from Suffolk, England, about 1638 and settled in Massachusetts. John belonged to the sixth generation of the family in the United States, all the male representatives of which had become agriculturists.⁸ When John Bixby, who had been a teacher in Maine, arrived in California in his early twenties, he was given employment by his cousin, Jotham Bixby, at Rancho Los Cerritos in Los Angeles County.⁸ Living on the ranch with Jotham Bixby's family was Jotham's wife's sister, Susan Hathaway. John and Susan soon fell in love and when they married they moved to Wilmington to make their home.⁹

In 1874 the decree of partition of Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana was entered in the Los Angeles courts and John W. Bixby very soon began

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negotiations for the purchase of the league of land that had been left by Bernardo Yorba's will to his widow and two youngest sons, Bernardo and Javier. F. P. F. Temple, guardian of Bernardo and Javier, petitioned the courts for permission to sell 2,155.9 acres that stood in the name of the two boys. The sale was made to F. M. Slaughter and the court order was signed on 1 June 1875 and the deed recorded on 24 June of the same year. The same day the property was deeded to John W. Bixby. At the same time a deed was recorded for 3,000.3 acres from Andrea E. de Davila, widow of Bernardo to John Bixby.⁴

John Bixby used the ranch for stock raising for a number of years before the third purchase was made, of the three, that went into forming what John Bixby named Rancho Santa Ana.⁴

By terms of Bernardo Yorba's will, a sycamore tree became the starting point for the surveys that later established the present Rancho Santa Ana. Terry Stephenson, a student of early California history later wrote: ". . . it seems fitting that a native tree of California should have had an important part in an early survey of the property on which today the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden is located."⁴

In 1878 John W. Bixby and his wife, Susan Hathaway Bixby, subleased part of Rancho Los Alamitos and moved from Wilmington with their young son, Fred Hathaway Bixby.¹¹ In 1880 a daughter, Susanna Patterson Bixby, was born at the ranch. She was the person who later was to found the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.

In 1881 the entire ranch came onto the market and a partnership consisting of I. W. Hellman, President of Farmers and Merchants Bank, Jotham Bixby Co., and John W. Bixby purchased Rancho Los Alamitos and John Bixby took over as manager.⁸ Under John's management the ranch flourished and among other things is noted for having introduced into southern California the first purebred Holstein cattle. When Long Beach was founded, John Bixby became a much-interested and public-minded citizen, giving of his time and thought to its welfare. He was a member of the board that built the first school in Long Beach and he set aside the land for Bixby Park where he planted the trees that now give shade and beauty to the area.⁸

In 1887, following a brief illness, John W. Bixby died at the age of 39. After his death his widow withdrew from people, even from her sister, Martha, and other relatives at nearby Rancho Los Cerritos. She dressed herself and only daughter "in black, head to toe, for a seemingly endless period of mourning. This lasted for Sue [Susanna] to the end of childhood; for her mother to the end of her life."¹²

After John Bixby's death his widow, Susan, moved to Berkeley where Fred H. Bixby entered Belmont Military school at nearby San Mateo and

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daughter Susanna entered a school newly established in Berkeley by Miss Anna Head. During vacation periods at Rancho Los Alamitos, Fred and Susanna entertained many of their friends and among them was Allen L. Chickering (1875-1958), later a prominent San Francisco attorney and one who was to play an important role in the establishment of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.¹² After Fred's graduation in 1898 from the University of California, Susanna went to finishing school in Boston, Miss Hersey's on Beacon Street, "where regular lectures included Harvard professors Santayana and William James."¹² Formal education for her ended in two years and a portion of the following year was spent in Europe with her mother. This was followed by a leisurely tour around the world chaperoned by the German teacher from Miss Head's school. Returning to California in 1902, Susanna decided to live in San Francisco at which time she "dipped into a sizeable inheritance from her father, to acquire an apartment." According to her daughter, Susanna Bryant Dakin:

This seemed a dashing thing to do, at the turn of the century, and of course Grandmother did not approve, but her daughter inherited a strong will. In Maine it would have been said that both women were "set as the everlasting hills."¹²

Sue chose to live on Russian Hill within the "bay window Bohemia" inhabited by such people as editor and writer, Gelett Burgess, "Ina Coolbrith who became the first Poet Laureate of California," Frank Norris the writer, Willis Polk, "inventive architect in the Bay Area" and Arnold Genthe, artist-photographer who is reported to have taken Sue "even into opium dens, while he was recording the San Francisco soon to be laid waste in the earthquake and fire of 1906."¹²

One afternoon in April 1904, at the Los Angeles Country Club, Susanna Bixby met Dr Ernest Albert Bryant.¹² Born near Woodstock, Ontario, Canada, and a graduate of the medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr Bryant (1869-1933) was at the time one of the most prominent young physicians and surgeons in Los Angeles and later became Henry E. Huntington's friend and personal physician as well as Surgical Director for the Southern Pacific Railroad.¹³ Describing their meeting, Susanna Bryant Dakin wrote:

Ernest Bryant saw a vision in Sue Bixby, done up like Eliza Doolittle at Ascot. Willowy, seeming tall as he in her dainty, high heeled slippers, she was dressed all in white with a lacy white parasol. Clear blue eyes, naturally wavy brown hair, a magnolia complexion, fragrance of violets—everything about the northern visitor the old bachelor found irresistible, from the moment his eyes found hers.¹²

Later on he is reported to have said "I thought she was a Clinging Vine!" This became a family joke, "as Mother's true nature revealed itself, for

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a 'man's mind' and business sense operated behind the 'Gibson Girl' facade with surprising results."¹² After a three-month whirlwind romance Ernest Bryant and Susanna P. Bixby were married later the same year. After a honeymoon in Alaska, the young couple made their home in Los Angeles on west 28th Street. A daughter, Susanna (Mrs Richard Y. Dakin), was born in 1905 and a son, Ernest, Jr, in 1907.

Vacations were often spent at Rancho Los Alamitos and according to daughter Susanna, their ranch life expanded after her mother "found a lifelong outlet for her superior mind and executive powers."¹² Besides a share in the Los Alamitos ranch, she had inherited a portion of Rancho Santa Ana and in 1912 at the age of 32, "tired of women's luncheons and teas, committee meetings and benefits . . . she decided to take on active management of Rancho Santa Ana."¹² That same year Mrs Bryant built a home on the ranch and planted the first citrus orchard. Eventually she bought out her brother's interests and in 1925 became sole owner of the nearly 6000-acre Rancho Santa Ana. The next few years were largely devoted to the development of the ranch, in the planting of more orchards and experimenting with peanuts, cotton, lichee nuts, and pink grapefruit. According to daughter Susanna, she later converted some of the remaining pastureland into a preserve for California plants, "forcing reluctant ones to grow by the sheer strength of her will."¹²