

Early History of Rancho Alegre

Rancho Alegre--the “happy ranch”--was donated by Huguetta Clark as a gift in memory of her mother, Mrs. William Clark, to the Mission Council of the Boy Scouts of America in October 1964. Rancho Alegre consists of parcels of land from two old homesteads.

The western portion of Rancho Alegre, in the vicinity of the ranch house, barn, and Cubland, was homesteaded by William Step in 1879. Bill Step was son of “Grandpa” Step, who had settled further up Tequepis Canyon a few years earlier.

The eastern portion of Rancho Alegre, in the vicinity of Arapaho, Piute, and Navajo campsites, was homesteaded by the Ilenstine family, related to the Steps through marriage. There remain a few artifacts *in situ* of the Ilenstines’ residence at Rancho Alegre, including stone walls on United States Forest Service land immediately to the north of Arapaho.

Rancho Alegre comprises 214 acres in south central Santa Barbara County, on the northern side of the coastal Santa Ynez Mountain Range. To its north lies the inland San Rafael Mountain Range on the other side of Cachuma Lake.

Rancho Alegre has a varied topography, from a peak of about 1200 feet above sea level to a bottom of about 950 feet. The ranch has seven permanent plant communities--oak woodlands, riparian, oak savanna, soft chaparral, hard chaparral, grassland, and (formerly) pond and lake.

Native American Eons

Rancho Alegre was inhabited by the Chumash for hundreds of years before it was homesteaded. There were two major Chumash encampments in the vicinity of Rancho Alegre, the largest a village that now lies under thirty feet of water in Lake Cachuma (when it is full) where Tequepis Creek once flowed into the Santa Ynez River. The other encampment was to the

southwest of Rancho Alegre, near what became Camp Drake. In the summers, the Chumash would move from the Santa Ynez River to this latter site in order to take advantage of its cooler climate.

The Chumash were hunters and gatherers. They did not practice agriculture nor did they possess domesticated animals. According to one description of them, prepared by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History: "The Chumash way of life reflected the natural world around them. This world was the source for their food, clothing, homes and tools. It was the inspiration for their religious beliefs, music, and ceremonies. They respected and even feared the natural world, for their lives depended on it ... It could bring them abundance, or threaten them with famine, flood, or disease."

The Chumash lived in the area extending from Santa Paula and Malibu in the south to San Luis Obispo in the north. Most of the Chumash lived along the coast or on the channel islands. Only a relatively few lived inland. The villages near Rancho Alegre were the home of perhaps dozens of residents.

A. L. Kroeber wrote in 1923 in his *Handbook of the Indians of California* that the "Spaniards were disposed to regard the Chumash as superior to the other tribes of California with whom they had acquaintance." Compared to other California tribes, the Chumash possessed higher material, technical, economic, and spiritual development.

Painted Cave is located about ten miles east of Rancho Alegre, but it is not known to what extent, if any, Chumash from the Rancho Alegre area participated in the ceremonies that were conducted there. That the Chumash had a complex cosmology is attested by the rock art at Painted Cave and elsewhere.

Among Chumash ceremonial dances was a swordfish dance. For this dance, participants wore swordfish headdresses. The swordfish dance marked the role of swordfish in, as the Chumash thought, driving whales ashore and thus providing a plentiful supply of food. The Chumash enjoyed many games, contests, artistry, craftsmanship, gambling, music, and song.

Settler Decades

The Spanish left almost no imprint on Rancho Alegre. Though the first land grant for the Rancho Alegre area was bestowed by Mexico in 1845, the first European settlers to live in the area were the families who came in the 1870s, about twenty-five years after California became part of the United States.

Grandpa Step homesteaded in 1875 the parcel of land now known as Rowe Field. Here, he planted fruit trees, a few of which still stand. Their harvest, together with grapes from a vineyard, were brought by wagon to Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez for sale. This homestead was never properly “proved up” (established as private property), and it later reverted to the federal government and is now owned by the Forest Service.

Other members of the Step family homesteaded other areas in and near Rancho Alegre. “Grandma” Step homesteaded the area to the east of Rancho Alegre that became Rancho San Francisco.

The Ilenstines had eight children, two of whom were born after the family built their home in the area. They originally lived in what is now Piute campsite and later moved to the Arapaho area, both near what is now the archery range. The Ilenstines had horses, pigs, and cows. They also raised vegetables and strawberries, which, together with freshly killed and smoked pork, they hauled by wagon to Santa Barbara, a long trip over the steep and narrow mountain roads.

In 1893, there was a school for three months from August to November on Rancho Alegre. Eighteen-year-old Grace Lyons, just graduated from teacher’s school in San Luis Obispo, taught in a building the Ilenstines had built in Piute. A year later, this school, whose attendance was drawn from families in the immediate vicinity and whose children walked or rode horseback to school every day, moved about a mile east to Grandma Step’s ranch.

Over sixty years later, Grace Lyons Davison had these memories of this first school on what has become Rancho Alegre:

The twenty-four children who crowded the room came from six families, each living in one of the many mountain canyons. The children had very little contact with the outside world, and seemed glad to get together on school days. This first term there was nothing in the way of problems in discipline....

When recess time came ... the teacher went outside to look about. Not far from the school room was a small building with a burlap curtain for a door. This had been thought adequate for emergency needs. The location of the school was very rocky and no place to play ordinary games. The oak trees across from the house offered shade on the hot August days and a place to play.

George Guntermann, a longtime scout and scouter in Mission Council, recalled visiting Camp Drake perhaps as early as 1929. He met Bill Step there, and remembers him as a tall, thin, friendly old man, who chewed tobacco and played the harmonica. George remembered that when Mr. Step gave him his harmonica to play, it was tobacco-saturated.

Slim Larsen, the first and longtime camp ranger of Rancho Alegre, and in many ways the last of the settlers, concluded his memoirs: "The history of this area, in and around Tequepis Canyon, is very colorful ... I feel very fortunate to have known these hardy people, who eked out a living, raised their families and homesteaded in many of these mountain canyons." As with the Chumash, a few artifacts from Rancho Alegre's settler decades remain at camp on display.

Order of the Arrow

Camp Drake was the first Boy Scout camp in Tequepis Canyon. Located about half a mile up the canyon from the ranch house at Rancho Alegre, Camp Drake was acquired in 1923, concurrent with the arrival of Calvin McCray as scout executive of Mission Council.

Camp proper of Camp Drake was much smaller than Rancho Alegre, 11 acres leased from the United States Forest Service. Later, additional land down the road from camp, Rowe Field, was secured.

Camp Drake was built before development of Lake Cachuma. The area was quite rugged, with only a few ranches in the vicinity. Scouts took backpacking trips from Camp Drake during the two-week camp sessions to such places as Manzana Schoolhouse.

The Order of the Arrow became an integral part of Camp Drake from the founding of Canaliño Lodge 90 in the summer of 1936, the first lodge west of the Rocky Mountains. Camp Drake had previously honored outstanding campers with the Gold Sun award, but as Cal McCray explained the principles and purposes of the OA, the camp staff soon warmed to the idea of a lodge. Charter members of the lodge include Bob Petersen, George Guntermann, Stan Bartlett, and Henry Levy.

Bob Petersen wrote that the "Charter Lodge members found it appropriate that Cal McCray should begin the Order in his last year with Mission Council--for the principles of the OA and the policies that the Lodge tried to promote at Camp Drake were largely his." When asked years later why he brought the Order of the Arrow to Camp Drake and Mission Council, McCray replied: "During this period, the junior leaders were the spirit of Camp Drake. They were our honor campers and Gold Sun recipients, and the Order had more to offer. It had an interesting basis in Indian lore, a program that provided service to camping the year round and not just during the summer months, and, most important, the opportunity for its members to meet and exchange thought with similar young men from other councils."

During the 1950s, the Order of the Arrow reached its peak at Camp Drake, as the early members who had served in World War II returned and joined with new camp leadership that had developed at Camp Drake during their absence. They established the Sun Dance, an annual event held over the Labor Day weekend, first under Chief Andy Bisaccia. Members of the lodge were brought before a ceremonial sun dance pole, the chief symbolizing the cutting of flesh, and the medicine man attaching skewers descending from the pole to each candidate with flesh-colored tape. Members then danced around the pole until they eventually broke away. At its height, perhaps as many as 1,000 spectators viewed the Sun Dance.

Rancho Alegre

Rancho Alegre was formed in 1936 when Thomas Storke, longtime publisher of the *Santa Barbara News-Press*, purchased the Step and Ilenstine parcels. He named the new ranch “Pasatiempo,” Spanish for “passing time.” In 1943, Storke’s property was purchased by Mrs. William Clark, reportedly because she feared another attack on Santa Barbara similar to the Japanese shelling of Ellwood in 1942.

Simultaneous with Clark’s acquisition of Rancho Alegre, Niels “Slim” Larsen became caretaker and manager of the ranch, and he and his wife, Oda, moved there. It was then the ranch received its name, Slim wrote in his memoirs, “ranch of pleasure of happiness. This it has been all these many years. Our three children, Thomas, James, and Diane, all grew up on the ranch, and there is no doubt that the happiest days of my life have been spent on Rancho Alegre.”

When Rancho Alegre became a Boy Scout camp in October 1964, Slim became the first camp ranger, and his stories, recorded in *A Camp Ranger’s Memoirs*, are classics that provide much of the flavor of the early camp. A few follow:

Rattlesnakes

For a few years, a young man named Paul Cronshaw taught the nature program during summer camp. Paul was very much against killing rattlesnakes. Whenever they were found in camp, he would carry them to safety some distance away. He also kept one in a cage for Scouts to study.

After one summer camp was over, Paul asked me if he could borrow a rattler, assuring me he would bring it back and turn it loose. He had just accepted a teaching position in biology and science at St. Joseph's High School in Santa Maria, and thought this would be a great place to study the snake. Well, Paul took the cage and rattler away from camp with him, and one morning took them along to school. Upon arriving at school, he removed the cage from his car, and set it down on the ground, also removing some other things which had to be taken into school. He then noticed that the cage door was not fastened properly, and had a slight opening in one corner. Upon closer inspection, he also discovered the rattler was gone!

Paul searched for a long time around the car and nearby shrubs, but could find no snake. He lived in fear of what he had done, until as days passed and no one had seen the rattler, he decided it had by now left the area.

About a month later, Paul had a date with his girlfriend. He decided to give his old car a thorough cleaning, inside and out. Poking around for anything which might have gotten shoved under the front seat, Paul found his snake. It had been quietly riding back and forth to school with him for almost a month!

An Octopus in the Lake

Lake Janis has turned out to be the fun place of camp. Boating and canoeing, and fishing for bass, bluegill, and catfish, can keep boys occupied for hours on end. The lake requires much supervision, and we have strict rules about using it.

After Boy Scout camp is over for the summer, we have had a Cub Scout day camp at Rancho Alegre. For a couple of years, this was a big program, with Cub Scouts being bused to and from camp each day. The same staff of teenage Boy Scouts who help during the regular summer camp program stay on and help with the Cub Scouts.

One morning during Cub Scout week, I saw some of the staff with a large, home-made octopus. It was made up of an old punching bag, and had long sections of bicycle tube sewn on to it. The staff placed this in the lake, and when rowing near it, would tell the Cub Scouts that there was a big octopus. The staff moved the octopus each day, and the Cubs were sure it was for real.

At the end of the week, I heard that the staff were going to try to catch the octopus on Friday afternoon, the last day of camp for the Cubs. I couldn't see anything wrong with their octopus prank, and on Friday afternoon showed up near the boat dock. About one hundred Cub Scouts were assembled there, waiting for the staff to catch the big octopus. One of the waterfront staff was paddling around in a kayak, 'looking' for the octopus, and another was walking along the dam with a bow and a handful of arrows. Two other staff members were on the boat dock, keeping watch.

Suddenly, a yell from the young man in the kayak, 'I found it!' Lo and behold, a big octopus rises out of the water and throws its long black arms around the helpless youth in the kayak. A violent struggle ensues, in which the archer takes aim and lets fly an arrow. The arrow narrowly misses our struggling youth, but goes clear through the kayak. The kayak now has rolled over, and with its occupant in the water, I decide it is time to take action. Cries from the Cubs are now frantic, some crying and others yelling for someone to help. Turning to comfort a Cub Scout crying nearby, and to assure him that the staff are only playing a prank, I see the two young men on the dock dive into the water and rescue the helpless youth from the octopus. By the time I can make my way through the crowd of Cub Scouts, the two rescuers have towed the other youth to shore, and are giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I finally get things stopped and try to tell the Cubs it is all a prank, but to them it all seems so real. Seeing bubbles moving slowly towards the dock, I soon find another staff man with scuba gear on. I now know why that octopus had become so active out in the lake.

One Armed Indian Story

I told many stories around the campfire about the early history of Rancho Alegre, and of the Indians who lived here before the white man. But the story of the one armed Indian was one I had heard myself around a campfire many years ago.

The story goes that at one time, years ago, when many Indians lived here, an Indian warrior was hit on his arm by an arrow during a skirmish between local Indians. Without the modern medicines we have today, infection set in and he lost his arm. The story goes that this Indian, unable to fight as a warrior, left his tribe and now roams the mountains alone, with a crazy idea he can find an arm somewhere to replace the one he lost. When he spots a tent,

he will come quietly up and check the sleeper, to see if he has an arm that he might be able to use. The one armed Indian then marks several arms with an 'X', with a piece of charcoal from the campfire. Before a decision can be made as to which arm to take, daylight approaches and he must leave. Now, I would then tell the Scouts, usually taking a piece of charcoal from the campfire and drawing an 'X' on my arm for effect, if any Scout wakes up in the morning with an 'X' on his arm, be sure to wash real well so that the one armed Indian doesn't come back to take your arm.

As usual after the campfire, when all are asleep, someone decides to mark some arms. On one particular night, a Scout took this story very seriously. So seriously that, upon retiring he lay down on top of his sleeping bag, open Scout knife in hand, ready to defend himself should a one armed Indian decide to take one of his arms. And as fate would have it, his tent was the one that some staff members decided to visit, and place an 'X' mark on the sleeping Scout. Costumed as an Indian, with a feather in a head band, the staff member doing the marking carefully tip-toed to the Scout's tent and opened the flap. The terrified Scout, still awake, saw the tent flap open. When he saw the costumed Indian, he came out of that tent and slashed with his knife and managed to inflict a very light scratch on the now terrified staff member's arm. It was a long time before this story was told at a campfire again.

Buried Treasure

During my early years on Rancho Alegre, I was often visited by two old gentlemen by the names of Clarence Step and Walter Ilenstine. Clarence Step was raised on the ranch in the vicinity of where the ranch house is, and Walter Ilenstine grew up on a homestead where Piute campsite now is located. These two men told me many stories of their growing up in this still quite wild mountain area.

One day, they arrived at the ranch and wanted to take some good leaf mold with them, to mix with their garden soil where they now lived. Loading leaf mold into sacks a short way above the ranch buildings, their shovel struck some metal. Upon closer examination, they discovered an old Wells Fargo lock. They then came back to the ranch house, and told me the following story.

About the year 1900, the stage coach which traveled between Santa Barbara and Los Olivos was often held up by a lone bandit. The method this bandit used to stop the stage coach was to drag a fallen limb across the narrow stage coach road. The bandit would rob the stage coach of its Wells Fargo box, which usually carried money and gold shipments, and would also rob the passengers of their valuables. He then rode up the canyon through the Step ranch.

Some time elapsed before the stage coach reached Santa Ynez and alerted the sheriff. A posse was formed, which soon arrived at the Step ranch. There, Mr. Step and his young son Clarence joined the posse on horseback, and trailed the bandit about a half-mile above the ranch. At this point, alongside the trail, they found a Wells Fargo box broken open, with all the valuables gone. After a short time, they lost the tracks of the bandit on a trail which led into the back part of the ranch, near where the Rancho Alegre campfire bowl is now located.

I told his story many times at campfires. Usually, I ended up by telling the boys that, since none of the valuables which this bandit stole were ever found, there may be buried treasure on Rancho Alegre. This generally created a little bit of excitement, and sometimes a bit of searching by the more imaginative Scouts. One last thing I would always ask the Scouts is that, if they ever did find the treasure, 'Scout's honor,' they'd share it with me!

1970s and '80s Rancho Alegre Summer Camp Songs

“Flea Fly”

Flea

Flea Fly

Flea Fly Flu

Stavesta

Kum-a-la-da, Kum-a-la-da, Kum-a-la-da, Vesta

Oh no, no not Stavesta

Eenie meanie des a meanie do-op do wa ta meanie

Ex-a-meanie, xy-la-meanie, do-op do-op

Beep be de le oap ‘n boob-‘n be bop ‘n street-‘n op in

Beep be de le oap ‘n boob-‘n be bop ‘n street-‘n op in

Sssshhhh

“Fleas, Flies, Mosquitos” (the Rancho Alegre version)

Fleas

Fleas, Flies

Fleas, Flies, Mosquitoes

A lotion

Calamine, calamine, calamine lotion

Oh, no more calamine lotion

Itchy, itchy, scratchy, scratchy, ooh I got one on my back-y

Eek! goes the bugs when you spray them with the bug spray

Eek! goes the bugs when you spray them with the bug spray

Pssss