



EARLY DAYS AT JESUS MARIA

By Eric J. Costa

One of the earliest known documents referring to the mining camp of Jesus Maria is the diary of Ramon Gil Navarro, an Argentinean. He departed Chile in February of 1849, arriving at the placers of the Calaveras River in July of that same year. While traveling to Jesus Maria in September of 1850, Navarro recorded the following incident:

"We have come back to the mines [from Stockton]. On the way to Jesus Maria today we came across a horrible spectacle. Moyano and I were immersed in a good conversation when we ran across the bodies of men who had been murdered moments before... What were we to do? I only had my knife and Moyano no weapons at all."

It is unfortunate that the first mention of Jesus Maria should record such a violent incident. Yet it seems as though it merely sets the stage for what was to occur in forthcoming years. As we shall see, Jesus Maria had more than its share of crime and violence.

Within a very short time, Jesus Maria transformed from a temporary placer camp

to a more permanent settlement. In June of 1852, the *Calaveras Chronicle* reported on the town:

"This place, which a short time ago was but an inconsiderable camp, consisting of a few scattered tents, presents now the appearance of a fine and flourishing village. Large numbers of miners are daily arriving, and houses are

~~is~~ This Statement must be Sworn to. ~~is~~

ASSESSMENT LIST, 1859.

State of California, }
COUNTY OF CALAVERAS, }

I, Jesus Maria do
solemnly swear, that, to the best of my knowledge and ability, I have made a true answer to each of the interrogatories herunto annexed, and which were propounded to me by the Assessor in performance of the duties of his office; and I farther swear that the property described and valued in said answers, is all the property of every kind or nature owned by me, or that I have under my charge or control for another.

Sworn and subscribed, this 21st day of July, A. D. 1859, before me,
J. H. [Signature] Assessor.

This 1859 assessment was for a house and lot valued at \$45 owned by Jesus Maria, living in Jesus Maria. Was this the man for whom the town was named? Courtesy Calaveras County Assessment Archives.

springing up with surprising rapidity. Hill diggings have been struck, and tunneling is carried on to a large extent. We know of scarcely a single instance of a tunnel in operation there which is not paying something, while some are said to be remarkably rich."

Being conveniently situated in a small valley and at the junction of several gold-rich ravines, the town of Jesus Maria developed into a local trading center. It was also a place of general recreation for the hundreds of miners who had built cabins or pitched tents along the banks of Jesus Maria Creek, the nearby Calaveras River or in the surrounding hills.

It is generally recognized that the southern mines were far more diverse than many other portions of the Mother Lode, and perhaps there is no better example of this [diversity] than Jesus Maria. Within the confines of a few square miles, miners from many different countries could be found working in close proximity to one another. In addition to the American Argonauts, there were also large contingents from Chile and other South American countries. Mexico, France, and Italy also contributed miners who were active in the area at a very early date. Not to be overlooked, there were also a considerable number of California-born Hispanics, or the Californios.

In July of 1852, the *Calaveras Chronicle* reported that the river in the neighborhood of Jesus

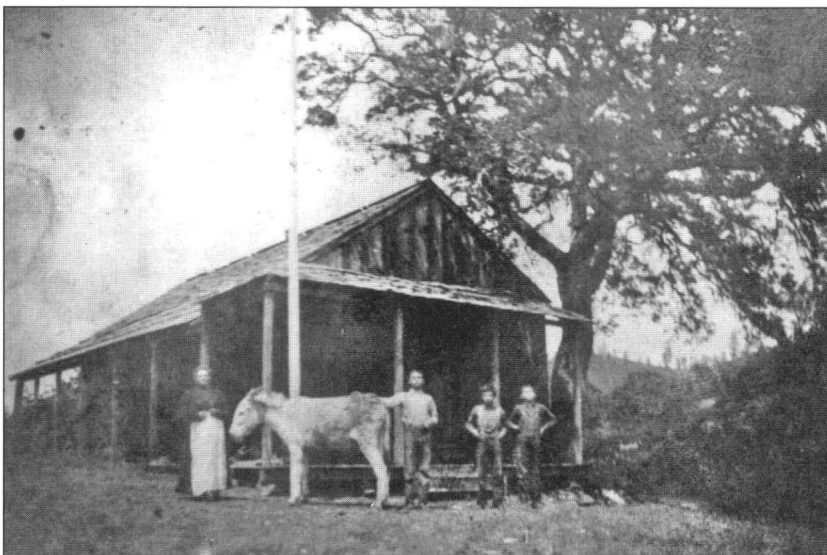
Maria had already been turned at several places by "Mexicans, Frenchmen and other foreigners" who were uncovering very rich gold deposits in the exposed river bed. Reliable population figures for this time period are unavailable, but what can be determined is that in June of 1854, some 213 votes were cast in Jesus Maria. If we assume there were at least as many non-voting Chileans, French, Mexican, Italian and other foreign-born residents in the immediate vicinity of Jesus Maria, it seems reasonable to estimate that there may have been around 400 to 500 people in the area.

It must also be remembered that during this period the population was extremely transitory. If word of new diggings or a rich discovery reached a camp, then many miners simply moved on. Local mining populations could fluctuate widely. In addition, if seasonal creeks dried out, and water for mining became scarce, many miners simply moved back to the larger rivers or other areas where there was yet water available for placering. If not having enough water for mining could be a problem, then so too was too much water. In the fall of 1852 the newspaper reported:

"Although this camp is not in so flourishing a state as it was during the summer month, there is still a fair amount of trade trasacted in it. Water is beginning to trouble those who are working in the bed of the Jesus Maria stream, which is rapidly rising. We may expect soon to see the main branch of mining in these diggings deserted for the gulches."

Another reason led to Jesus Maria becoming a larger and more important camp. In addition to the gold deposits that occurred in the creeks and river, very rich gravels were also discovered in the hill-sides. In 1852 a tunnel driven 500 feet into a hill contained some very rich ground. According to reports at the time, some wheel barrow loads contained up to \$25 in gold, which at that time was probably just under two ounces.

Two years later, hillside or drift mining was still an important source



Children of Jesus Maria attended the Negro Gulch School. Celestina Lagomarsino Bonfiglio Guiffra was the teacher in the picture. Celestina rode the donkey to school. She was crippled and school was too far away from her home for her to walk.
Calaveras County Historical Society photo, circa 1890s.

of gold in Jesus Maria. The *Calaveras Chronicle* reported the following:

“Five different companies are funning tunnels into the hills bordering on Negro Gulch, near Jesus Maria, in order to cut off a rich lead known to exist in the vicinity. The Wiggins tunnel on Jesus Maria Gulch is still paying extraordinarily. Fifty dollars to the wheelbarrow load is considered an average of its yield.”

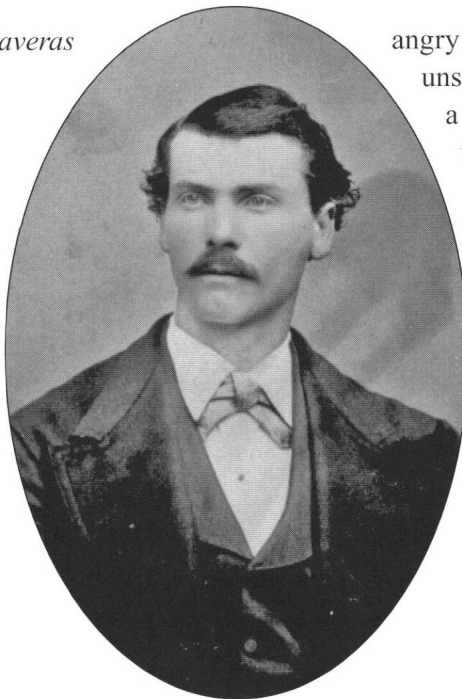
These rich discoveries inevitably led to competition among the local miners. *“On Wednesday, some Americans in Jesus Maria jumped a claim belonging to a Chilean who had not paid his Foreign Miners Tax,”* reported the paper.

As claim disputes became more and more common, violence in the local saloons and crime escalated. In response, in September of 1854 the American miners formed a militia, known locally as the Jesus Maria Guards. According to the newspaper, the militia was required because *“nine-tenths of the population was turbulent and evil-disposed.”*

At first organization the Guard contained some 51 men, mostly miners headed by a few ex-military men. Selected as Captain was Arnold Colt Lewis, a former Pennsylvanian, local Justice of the Peace, and veteran of the Mexican-American War. Two years earlier, Lewis had organized another militia, the First Calaveras Guard at Mokelumne Hill. Other officers in the Jesus Maria Guards were Nathan Holmes who was 1st Lieutenant and a local store keeper, and R. A. Wiggins, 2nd Lieutenant, being the same Wiggins mentioned previously who tunneled in Jesus Maria Gulch.

The Jesus Maria Guards participated in a wide range of activities, from escorting a condemned man to the gallows in Mokelumne Hill, to settling a dispute between an Italian and a Chilean in a Jesus Maria dance hall. In addition they were also involved in helping local officials collect the Foreign Miners Tax.

In 1855, Captain Lewis put himself between a Mexican miner accused of murdering William Joyce, one of Jesus Maria’s first residents, and an



John Gnecco was born in Italy in 1851 and chose to live out his years in Jesus Maria.
Historical Society photo, circa 1870.

angry lynch mob. Although Lewis was unsuccessful in his attempt to prevent a hanging, the incident speaks well to the character of Lewis.

By 1857 the Jesus Maria Guards had disbanded. Lewis remained in Calaveras County until around that time. He later became a Major in Company C of the 46th Pennsylvania and died in 1861 during the Civil War when he was killed by one of his own men.

A good example of the sentiment that existed at the time is an editorial written by an American quoted in Limbaugh and Fuller’s book *Calaveras Gold*. His words were directed at the Chilean miners working on Jesus Maria Creek. He claimed they were *“merely coyoting here and there*

where they find a rich crevice.” Further he wrote, *“This class of foreigner are very expert in finding rich deposits, and work without regularity, thus, in most cases, spoiling a claim which otherwise would have afforded regular and profitable employment to other miners.”*

Despite the volatility that permeated this period, time could still be made for various festivities and celebrations. In September of 1855, the Chilean citizens of Calaveras County, some 200 strong, gathered in “Chilecita,” the Little Chile portion of Jesus Maria, for a celebration of their country’s Independence Day, which included feasting, games and dancing.

Placer mining remained profitable around Jesus Maria until at least as late as 1857. In April of that year the *Daily Alta California* reported that Orin Plum and Foley, who were ground-sluicing above town at Boston Flat, had recovered in excess of 300 ounces. R. A. Wiggins was also still involved in mining and had recently “washed out” some twelve ounces of gold, the paper reported.

Local tradition asserts that one of the early saloons in Jesus Maria was once the favorite haunt of outlaws, dry gulchers, and a wide variety of generally unsavory characters. It is also believed that unsuspecting miners were lured there to be



The Lagomarsino-Guiffra house, restored in 1987, evokes grand images of Jesus Maria's past.
Historical Society photo.

robbed of their gold, and sometimes murdered. While most local legends begin with a least a grain of truth, perhaps the following article that appeared in the *Sacramento Daily Union* in March of 1884 can offer an explanation for how this apparently true tale began.

"Last Sunday, while Paul Lancelle and John Platt were engaged in mining at the foot of Negro Gulch, in Jesus Maria, they unearthed ten human skeletons about five feet from the surface, and within a space of eight feet square. One skull was found with a bullet hole through it. In the early days the camp was full of the roughest characters to be found in the mining region, and the general impression is that the parties were foully dealt with, although a few persons are of the belief that is an old cemetery; but from the facts that the skeletons were found in what is supposed to be an old cellar, and that on the very ground where they were taken out once stood a large building, formerly used as a dance-house, lead others to believe that the whole party were murdered at various times and secretly buried there."

By the early 1860s, the residents of Jesus Maria had already started to rely more on agriculture than on mining, and things had started to calm down a bit. By consulting the 1860 census records and comparing them with the tax rolls for that

year, a pretty good picture of what Jesus Maria was like during that time period can be obtained. Specific homes and businesses are noted. On the north side of Main Street there were a wide range of businesses. The Jacob brothers, Eugene and Henry originally from France were operating a butcher shop. Ah Tong, a Chinese gardener had his house next door. In addition, José Maria from Mexico was operating a dance hall in one building and a bakery and butcher shop in another.

Other buildings on the same side of the street were Fulco's "fire proof store," Phillip's fruit store, Oliver's restaurant and the Mauna residence. Across the street to the south were Frenchman Joseph Gayou's stone store, Fulco's house, Phillip's storehouse, Alfred Norton's saloon, Bartolo's "billiard saloon," and Shipley's saloon. On the eastern edge of town was Elias Craig's blacksmith shop and L. Delaney's house. Joseph Dotta and Alexander Beffa from Switzerland had opened a nearby dairy. Just east of town below Boston Flat was Frank Dauphin's Ranch. At Boston Flat proper was the ranch owned by Agostino Lagomarsino, and farther up the hill toward Whiskey Slide was the Hughes' Ranch.

In February of 1861 a destructive fire ripped through a portion of Jesus Maria. It apparently started near the center of town at Ah Tong's residence and burned in a westerly direction on both sides of the street. The fire finally stopped at Fulco's building near the west end of town. Later that same year, Gayou's store, which had escaped the fire, was broken into and \$300 in money and jewelry were taken from the safe.

By 1865 many of the remaining businesses and residences had changed hands and several new names begin to appear. Francisco Necco's house was located to the west of Fulco's "old store" and L. W. Tanner was operating a hotel opposite Gayou's store. While mining had diminished greatly by 1870 it had not, nor would it ever, totally disappear. That year

eleven Chilean miners were still at work in the area, and Manuel Mauna still listed his primary occupation as miner.

Grape growing and winemaking had become popular with several of the residents of Jesus Maria during the late 1860s. By 1870, according to the agricultural statistics gathered in conjunction with the census, Frank Gnecco produced some 2,000 gallons of wine, and B. Ratto & Co. another 2,500 gallons. Agostino Lagomarsino was one of Jesus Maria's most dedicated grape growers, and as early as 1870 he listed his primary occupation as vineyardist. In 1873, the *Calaveras Chronicle* reported:

"On Saturday last Mr. Lagomarsino proprietor of an extensive vineyard near Jesus Maria presented us with a basket of grapes that were the finest we ever saw. The grapes were the Flaming Tokay variety grown upon grafts two years old. Mr. Lagomarsino informs us that he does not irrigate his vines, work upon them being confined to trimming and cultivating the soil. So far Jesus Maria is ahead in the production of grapes."

Also growing grapes and making wine in the area was Guiseppa Guiffra and B. Cavanna. By 1889, John Gnecco was producing some thirty tons of grapes from his ten acre vineyard, and Lagomarsino had established some seven acres from which he produced twenty-one tons of grapes. Gnecco would later go on to establish a bonded distillery for the production of brandy.

Gradually, Jesus Maria had settled into a quiet agricultural community. In a directory published in 1876 just four businesses are listed: J. Gayou, general merchandise; F. Gnecco, general merchandise; E. Jacobgs, butcher; and A. Lagomarsino, wine grower. However, even as late as the early 1900s, mining still retained some importance for the residents of Jesus Maria. The Mauna brothers continued work on their lode mines just outside of town, and reportedly milled some nineteen tons of quartz containing around \$15 to the ton. By and large, most people in the area were engaged in a wide range of activities, including cattle grazing, vegetable gardening, planting fruit and olive trees, and drying prunes.

In 1938, the Jesus Maria precinct contained 27 registered voters. Some of those included on the

list were blacksmith Frank Bartlett and his family, ranchers Maurice and Edith Fischer, farmer James Gambetta, stock raiser Alvin Guiffra and his family, rancher Roy Gnecco and his family, stock raiser Willard Hughes and his family, and miner Adam Kramer and his family.

Acknowledgement: *Las Calaveras* is grateful to Eric Costa who contributed this article. He reminds us that the small communities of Calaveras County once enjoyed a thriving, if not boisterous past. History has often overlooked Jesus Maria, considering it instead to be a suburb of its larger neighbor Mokelumne Hill. For example, the 1902 voter register for the Jesus Maria precinct lists the residents as living in Mokelumne Hill. Few maps exist of this once bustling community. Fortunately records indicate otherwise. We know the community had several profitable mines, farms and businesses, and supported a number of families.

Costa has provided numerous statistics about early Jesus Maria that shed light on California's early ethnic conflicts and violence. We also learned of early observations on hard rock mining, and about early mining methods in general. Fortunately the community evolved from a violent enclave of miners to a quiet valley of agriculturalists. For additional information on the community, readers are encouraged to read *Las Calaveras*, July 1990.

Today a casual traveler may not notice the small community as they pass through. Upon closer inspection one can detect the cemetery, rock walls and ruins and numerous terraces of earlier homes or agricultural pursuits. Descendents of the pioneer families noted herein continue to live in the area today.

Jesus Maria today enjoys the distinction as California Historical Landmark No. 284. The description declares: "The community, the center of a large placer mining section, was named for a Mexican who raised vegetables and melons for the miners. It was settled in the early 1850s with a large population of Mexicans, French, Chileans, and Italians. Now it is only populated by a few families who live together and work for common goals, including a large community garden, basketball court, jungle gym for children, and a windmill to pump water."

Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

October–December, 2014

New Members:

Marilyn Marshall Mutzner—Sonora
Stephen Johnson—Oakland
Paul E. Louis—Oregon (Converted to Lifetime Membership)
Harold Rick Cuslidge—Stockton
Deanna L. Solina—Stockton
L. Caldwell—Ojai, CA
Cole and Gretel Tiscornia—Angels Camp
Brenda Brown—Mokelumne Hill
Rebecca Appling—San Andreas

Donations:

Jeff Olson—Two programs from the Mother Lode Theatre Co. Grand Opening February 9, 1924

Rebecca Appling—photos, newspapers, "Walking Tour Through Sheep Ranch", poster from the Sheep Ranch Volunteer Fire Company Spaghetti Feed and Dance at the Pioneer Hotel, news articles

Judi Beard—Chinese rice spoon carved from one piece of wood from early 1900s

Barbara Grogan—High chair used by the Dr. Turner family

Steven Yothers—Two photos of stagecoaches preparing to travel

Melinda S. Benton—Early 1900 canning jars, some with zinc and or glass lids, three wooden crates

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