

Do You Remember?

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Dyonisio (Dennis) Filbert Bernal

Pope Francis was hailed as the first Latin pope because he was born in Argentina. However, some people disagree with the appellation because his parents were born in Italy. There can be no mistake in labeling Dennis Bernal as Latino. It is true that he was born in Pleasanton in 1856 only six years after California became a state of the United States. However, his native language was Spanish, his parents, and grandparents were born in California when it was Alto California, part of Mexico, and his great grandparents came from Mexico with the 1776 de Anza expedition. His grandfather, Juan Pablo Bernal, was one of the owners of the large land grant Rancho El Valle de San José.

His father, Francisco (Frank), died in 1860 of typhoid fever when Dennis was only four. His mother, Maria Thompson Bernal, married Jeremiah Ponce, a native of Chile, three years later. Ponce took the family to Chile when Dennis was 12. According to Zylpha Bernal Beck (one of Dennis's children), Joshua Neal of Pleasanton was Dennis's guardian, and he sent an allowance regularly to Dennis, but Ponce would appropriate it. Finally, when he was 19, Dennis managed to return to California. Joshua Neal enabled him to attend the Golden Gate Military Academy

in Oakland. Within two years of Dennis's return, his mother and two sisters also made their way back to California; his brother died en route on the ship. Dennis graduated from Heald's Business College in January 1879. He bought part of the original Robert Livermore's Rancho Las Positas, 205 acres, from Livermore's daughter Carlotta and her husband, Mariano Avila, in 1882 for \$1,400. He and his sisters inherited land in the Rancho El Valle de San José: Dennis 541 acres, Delfina 562 acres, and Rita 584 acres. For a while, Dennis raised cattle on the properties.

In 1883 Dennis married Josephine Bailey, daughter of Hiram Bailey, at that time one of Alameda County's supervisors. Dennis Bernal was a man of many parts: farmer; dealer in real estate; developer of city power, lights and water; merchant; town official. The Herald's Midwinter Edition of 1896 described him as "one of Livermore's irrepressible pushers."

He bought the Livermore Brewery after the owner's death in 1901. In November 1908, Bernal and his family, who had been sleeping in their quarters above the brewery, barely escaped with their lives when the building burned down. There was a bright spot

in this sadness, however. Josephine told her husband that she had been saving a portion of her household allowance each week in a receptacle behind the chimney. When her husband looked, he found \$2,000 in gold coins, which had been only slightly discolored by the fire. With bricks scavenged from the wreckage of the brewery, Bernal built a little structure on Second Street, probably about 1910. Called the D.F. Bernal Building, it is currently the home of the Blowout Bar and Salon at 2152 Second Street.

Dennis F. Bernal kept an office on First Street next door to N.D. Dutcher's hardware store. In November 1892 he had bought from the Laumeister family their flouring mill, their electric light plant, and their water works known as the Livermore Deep Well Company. The mill burned down in 1894. However, Bernal sold the electric and water companies, by then called Livermore Water and Power, to California Gas and Electric in 1904. It is likely that he gave the Livermore Fire Department the famous long-burning light bulb when he went out of business. He volunteered as a town firefighter for a number of years.

On the 1910 U.S. census he was an "agent"; in 1920 he was a retail mer-



Dennis F. Bernal - from Wood's History of Alameda County 1883.

chant of near beer. From 1920 to 1924 he was the Livermore marshal; from 1924 until January 1928 he was the town treasurer. He was often called on by the justices of the peace to act as interpreter in trials.

In 1911 he built the two-story craftsman style home at 755 South L Street. It is covered with wide clapboard siding. A small barn, probably built for a garage, is in the back yard. Alice Anspacher lived across the street and described an Hispanic custom that she remembered for many years because of its dramatic nature. A "Spanish brother or cousin of the Bernals used to come riding down into the village every so often. He would gallop into the courtyard in front of the house. There, he would pull up his steed but he would not dismount. He would call and out would come trooping the family, welcoming him. . . . To honor him they would rush out with a dish of raw eggs, and he would crunch and suck one after the other. That was their way of

giving him tea, I suppose, but he never dismounted." Then he galloped off.

Dennis and Josephine had five children. In an interview long after his death, his wife described his generosity: "He was as likely to give a barefoot boy a note to the clothier to provide him with a pair of boots as he was to give a guitar-playing wayfarer an order on the grocery store for a supply of food." He was known for being a natty dresser and on special occasions wore his Spanish-cut suit. James D. Smith, head of the Livermore College, named Bernal as one of the three best horsemen he ever saw, praising especially his "elegance of style." Dennis died in 1932; Josephine died in 1961 at age 99. One of the heirlooms prized by the family was a floor-length flowered silk shawl, Maria Thompson Bernal's marriage gift from the Bernal family. It is on display at the Carnegie Building.

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