

LIVERMORE HERITAGE GUILD
THE LIVERMORE VALLEY HISTORY CENTER
CHAPTERS OF LIVERMORE HISTORY

THE CROSBY RANCH
CALLED
MULFONTES



The third Crosby house

*By Janet Newton, based on interviews with
Isabella Crosby McGeehon*

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Eleven miles from the town of Livermore, California, in the hills south of Del Valle Lake, there is a ranch that was the home of William Crosby and his family. Captain Crosby, who brought his bride to the ranch in 1887, gave it the name Mulfontes because it had many springs.

William Crosby, a veteran of the Civil War, came to San Francisco in 1869. He was a patent attorney. He also wrote drama criticisms for the San Francisco Chronicle.

It was in San Francisco that he met his bride, Maria Mac Lachlan. Her father, a member of a seafaring family, was born on the Isle of Mul, Scotland. In 1882, when a group that included D.O.Mills and C.P.Huntington decided to launch the U.S. Brazil Line, they offered Mac Lachlan the position of Marine Superintendent, and he accepted. Accordingly he moved his family to Brooklyn, New York. Not long afterwards, Maria's engagement to Captain Crosby was announced.

Captain Crosby had taken up a homestead claim in the canyon of the Arroyo del Valle about 1885 and in 1887 he brought his bride to a honeymoon cottage he had built on a site very high up in the hills of the ranch.

A man named Charlie (surname not known) who had worked and lived in the Arroyo Valle for many years (and who had a piece of land east and below the Crosbys that they called Charlie's garden), related that when Captain Crosby brought his bride home, people on the ranches along the way stood on the bank beside the road to watch the Captain and his bride drive by. In town her beauty made a great impression on those who saw her. Also the fact that she wore white gloves.

The side canyons of the Arroyo Valle are so steep that one time when one of the Crosby sons attempted to ride bareback up a trail, he slid off over the horse's tail. One place in the road up the canyon beyond the Crosby place was so steep that Mrs. Josephine Bernal (a grand-daughter of Robert Livermore) used to tie her children in the buggy when she drove to her husband's ranch.

On the evening in 1887 when Maria first saw the valley of her new home, Joe, the handsome palomino horse that her husband had given to her, balked when he reached a particularly steep part of the road. Maria elected to stay with the buck-board while William went forward to the house to get another horse. Maria said she felt very much alone when the led-horse went out of sight.

The new cottage was named "The Casita". A Welshman who had stayed on the place while the Captain was away, watched Mrs. Crosby walk up to the house and said "You walk uphill better than I thought you would". As a matter of fact, she was a very good walker.

The cottage was in the process of being enlarged, and because the roof had not been completed, all the bedding had been stored in another cabin. Again, Maria elected to stay behind while the men went away. Darkness came, the stars came out, and, Maria told her family afterwards, Brooklyn, New York, was never like that.

Captain Crosby began to devote himself to the life of a farmer. On those occasions when he did not have a hired man, he would get up "at the squawk of dawn", drink a cup of cold coffee, then work until noon. After breakfast, he would sit and read for a couple of hours. He ate only two meals a day.

He also practised law occasionally for his neighbors. He helped a man to get a pension, sorely needed because of injuries the man had received while in a Confederate prison.

A man named Darcy was the first man to live on the piece of land where the Casita was. He did not come to it by way of the canyon, but along the ridge to the west, cutting a trail down to the house-site that was known as the Darcy Trail.

After living in the Casita for a year, (all that was necessary for a veteran to "prove-up" a homestead), the Crosbys moved to a house on an adjacent tract that they had bought. Here they planted fruit trees and kept some cattle and chickens. They planted a big garden and a corn patch.

Across the valley to the east, the mountains rose up sharply from about 800 feet near the creek to the 3670 feet of Cedar Mountain. Their own land was at about the 1400 foot level, at the edge of a steep decline. The sloping fields and handsome oak trees around the house made a park-like panorama. Mrs. Crosby used to say of her husband's attachment to the valley that "the beauty of the place bewitched him."



*Picnic on Crosby Ranch about 1895
Maria Crosby in back with "Mulo"
William Crosby at right in front.*

The Crosbys had six children. They attended the one-room school about two miles down the road to town. It was built by a group of neighbors who contributed money and labor for it. The name of the school was the Arroyo Valle School, but because of the Spanish pronunciation of Valle, it was always referred to as the Bayou School. It is even marked this way on an old USGS map.

Miss Jordan, one of the teachers, had to leave the canyon to attend a teachers meeting one time in a heavy rainstorm. She rode side-saddle, with her woven basket luggage beside her and she carried an umbrella. Mrs. Mc Geehon remarked that a woman could collect a lap-ful of water riding side-saddle.

The Crosby children rode horseback to school, and in wet weather they got quite wet. Their boots and shoes would fill up. When they got home they would sit by the fire in what they called "the sitter room" and fill the boots with bran. It was quite a task to get the bran out in the morning. They would use the handle of a spoon to clean out the toes. Sometimes in wet weather, the children could tether their horses in the shed of a nearby house if it was unoccupied. But otherwise, they had to get onto very wet horses for the ride home.

Dan Bagley, a relative of the Sachau family, liked to tell a story about Maria Crosby. Once when William had gone into town, Maria went out to shoot a chicken for dinner. Frank Bird, the hired man, took the gun from her and fired and missed. After re-loading, and just as the projected dinner went by, Maria took aim and hit the chicken in the head.

Rachel Fraser, a retired Civil War nurse, took up a claim very high up on Cedar Mountain, where she could see the waters of San Francisco Bay. Her cabin was in a little glen that was watered by a spring. She grew vegetables and flowers and spent the rest of her life on the mountain. Her neighbors, who liked and respected her, grieved when one day she was found dead on a mossy bank where she had stopped to rest.

There was a reading circle in the Arroyo Valle composed of a group of neighbors. Once they invited the members of the Livermore Shakespeare Club to hold a meeting at the Crosby Ranch. It must have been about 1895. The horse-drawn bus "The Pride of Livermore" was used to bring the visitors from town to the ranch. The Halls brought their organ in their wood wagon. Mr. Hall gave a talk on Socrates. Capt. Crosby loved poetry. Once he recited "We have drunk from the same canteen" at such a gathering and noses were blown all over the place.

On the valley floor below the Crosbys was the homestead of Frances Floyd. He was an Irishman who always referred to his wife as "herself". In an old Livermore newspaper there is an account of one of the Floyd children being bitten by a rattlesnake. Their heavy-set horse Charlie was used to get the child into town as fast as possible, but it was too late and the child died. Mrs. Mc Geehon said that they were all cautioned not to put their hand down to the ground, but always to use a stick first to investigate.

In winter the creek could be deep and wild and dangerous. The old road crossed it many times and sometimes the valley residents were isolated. But the wild water could be an impressive sight. After a heavy rain, the Crosby children would run downhill to see the show. Their mother went with them for safety's sake. Once the Floyd children called out to them "The creek's a booming! Left the swimming hole last Tuesday!"

In 1908 the Crosbys built a third house on a bluff above the second house. At the front and to the east, the ground drops sharply down to large meadows and handsome oak trees. The hills on the other side of the canyon are covered with brush and scrub oaks and the soft bluish-green of the Digger Pines (*Pinus Sabiniana*). On the higher slopes there are Coulter Pines and Junipers (the so-called cedars). Near the house there are fine bay trees and maples.

Northward, towards Livermore, the rounded hills are more open and there is an immense expanse of sky. Cattle trails and crude roads traverse the pastures and birds float effortlessly over them.

I sat on the steps of the front porch of this house one summer evening. A full moon was rising over Man Ridge and the air of the quiet landscape was warm and soft. Captain Crosby must have enjoyed sitting there many times, I thought, enjoying the beauty of the Arroyo Valle.