

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

ALISAL BECOMES PLEASANTON

When Mission San Jose was secularized by Mexico in 1836, very few Indians returned to their native settlements. For the most part, despite the promises of the church, they received no land. They dispersed into nearby areas, working on ranches as laborers or as servants.

In the early 1860s, however, many Indians were displaced by two occurrences. A severe drought affected cattle raising efforts and lessened the need for labor. At the same time, law suits over ownership of the early Hispanic ranchos were settled in court. Most owners, even those who won their cases, had to sell their land to pay the lawyers.

The Bernal family was an exception—they survived the drawn-out legal process with the U.S. Land Commission after California became a part of the United States. The family received the patent to their Rancho El Valle de San José in 1865. Agustín Bernal owned the southern part of the rancho below today's Pleasanton. He allowed Indians to have a rancheria, a small settlement, below what is now the Castlewood Country Club on the Arroyo de la Laguna, perhaps at an old Pelnén (Ohlone) site on his property. They worked as ranch hands, hop-pickers, laborers and servants.

The rancheria was called Alisal, meaning "The Alders." These trees grew abundantly along the Arroyo de la Laguna. In 1872 the Alisal community participated in the Ghost Dance, sending leaders to the Sierra foothills to spread the religion, but the movement was short-lived.

The Indians who lived at Alisal were from many different tribes and spoke a variety of languages. Most of them were of mixed Indian heritage. A number of Alisal residents were interviewed by scholars from local universities. One of them, Jose Guzman, was typical with his ancestry that included Yokuts, Patwin, Coast, Bay, and Plains Miwok.

When Central Pacific laid tracks through the area in 1869, a train stop called Verona was built near Alisal. By the 1870 census, eighty-five native people had found refuge in the community. When the Hearst family bought property from Agustín Bernal that included Alisal, they allowed the Indians to live there undisturbed, but gradually the people of the rancheria had died or drifted away by 1914. Their last recognized chief, Jose Antonio, had died in 1900.

Meanwhile, farther to the north another settlement was growing. At first, it too was included in the designation "Alisal." Agustín Bernal and his second wife, María Juana Higuera, moved from Santa Clara County, beginning construction on his adobe on Foothill Road, then a winding dirt byway, about 1848. Agustín's brother, Juan Pablo Bernal, and his wife, Rafaela Feliz, moved north around 1852, building their adobe about where Amador Valley High School stands today. Agustín and Juan Pablo were quiet, reserved men respected in the San Jose community. They decided to locate on their rancho property to protect their interests while their case determining land ownership was in the court system.

Other people moved to this new Alisal area. It soon became a small town. Immigrant John W. Kottinger, an Austrian school teacher, married Juan Pablo's oldest daughter María Refugia in 1850. Several years later, they moved to an adobe on the south bank of the Arroyo del Valle on land given to his wife as a dowry.

Kottinger and Juan Pablo Bernal worked together, driving many head of cattle to the mines, where they were exchanged for gold. Kottinger was appointed Justice of the Peace and sometimes used part of his adobe barn for a jail. Although the Kottinger home built in 1865 is gone, the 1852 barn is still here at 200 Ray Street, the oldest building in downtown Pleasanton.

Kottinger surveyed and filed a subdivision map for some of his land in 1869. His plats ranged from the Arroyo del Valle to Division Street to the railroad tracks. At that time the town post office was on Kottinger's property. He decided to name the growing town after the Union Army Cavalry General Alfred Pleasonton. Some clerk erred, and the name became Pleasanton.

At almost the same time, on the south side of Division Street, Joshua Ayres Neal platted a portion of his property and gave land for a train depot. Neal was from New Hampshire. He had worked as foreman on Robert Livermore's rancho from 1850 until Livermore's death in 1858.

Neal married María Angela Bernal, daughter of Agustín, in 1862. Angela received 530 acres as her dowry. Neal named several of the streets in his plat for members of his family: Angela Street for his wife, Abbie Street for his mother Abigail, and Neal Street for the family. He sold the land at Neal and Second Street to the Presbyterian Church for \$250. He donated property at what is now First and Bernal for a school. The family home built in 1863 still stands at 431 Neal Street. Neal's portion of the town was laid out between Division, Main, Minnie (now Bernal), and Third Streets.

The town of Pleasanton was incorporated in 1894; by 1902 its population was 1,500. Today, the population is more than 67,000. (Readers can reach me at am3homan@yahoo.com.)