

# RANCHO MISSION VIEJO

*"Where History is Still Happening"*

SPECIAL RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA EDITION

**S** IRED BY SPAIN, mothered by Mexico and reared with Irish pluck, no parcel in Orange County enjoys a lengthier heritage than does the 40,000-acre Rancho Mission Viejo, whose destinies have been guided by Richard O'Neill and his descendants for over a century. Incorporating two former Mexican grants and portions of a third, the ranch's legacy began with the first Spanish expeditionary force into Alta California.

On July 22, 1769, Capitán Gaspar de Portolá, with 63 men and two priests, stepped across the ranch's southern border into local history. Here, in Cristianitas Canyon, the baptism of two Indian babes brought Christianity to California and the earliest place name to Orange County. Following a night's bivouac near the ranch's cattle camp on the Ortega, the explorers spent a day and a night on the mesa above O'Neill Park. The loss there of a soldier's gun inspired the name Trabuco (Spanish for *blunderbuss*), which survives today as the oldest ranch name in the state.

Six years later the ranch witnessed the first attempt to found Mission San Juan Capistrano. After the mission was relocated in 1778, its departure from San Juan Canyon endowed that area with the name "Mission Viejo," and historians with a dilemma which has lasted ever since. While the exact whereabouts of the "Old Mission" remains a mystery, the name has prevailed for over two centuries.

In 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain and a new flag fluttered over the province. Following secularization of the missions, huge estates were granted by the Mexican governor to a few promi-



RICHARD O'NEILL  
1825-1910

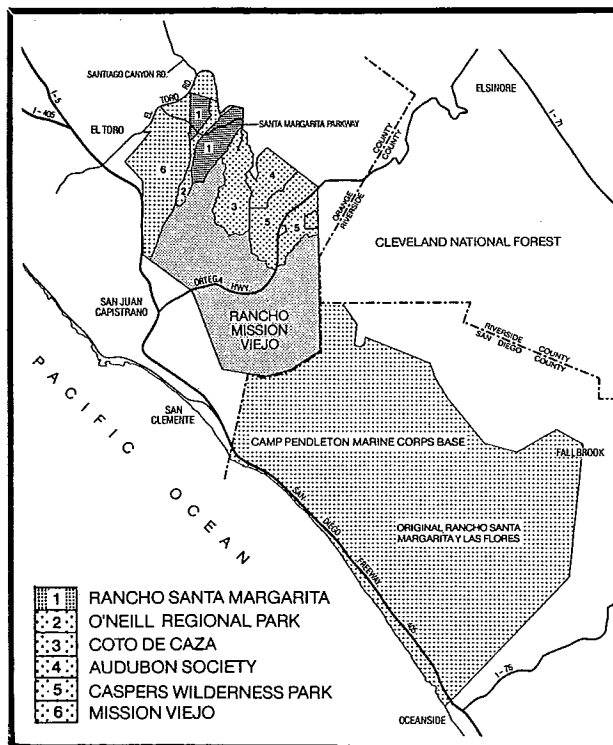
nent citizens. Among those in Orange County were the Ranchos Trabuco (22,184 acres), Mission Viejo (47,432 acres) and Los Potreros (1,167 acres). Acquiring title to each was an astute English trader named John Foster, who changed his name and citizenship and wisely married the governor's sister. Eventually "Don Juan Forster" would own even Mission San Juan Capistrano itself.

For his part, Forster's brother-in-law, Gov. Pío Pico, amassed a barony of 133,440 acres in San Diego known as the Santa Margarita, and gambling debts that nearly matched his estate. In 1846 Pico's high-rolling reign ended with the American invasion. Pursued and in exile, Mexico's last governor hid out in the old adobe on Trabuco Mesa, then fled the country. More pliable than his in-laws, Forster welcomed the Yankee intruders and continued to prosper under statehood. Sixteen years later he picked up Pico's mortgages and the Santa Margarita to stretch his holdings from Oceanside to Aliso Canyon.

It was a storybook beginning without a storybook end. By 1881 the cost of fencing more than 200,000 acres had drained Forster's capital; a series of droughts destroyed half his cattle and ill-fated promotions to attract settlers dried up the last of his credit. When he died a year later, Don Juan's estate teetered precariously between a half dozen heirs and a half-dozen banks.

Left with no choice, his sons had to sell.

Sizing up the ranch was a bantylegged Irish cattleman whose name was Richard O'Neill. Born in Brigown parish, County Cork, in the heart of Ireland's dairy country, he had traveled far in his 57 years and missed several



*Under Richard O'Neill, Rancho Santa Margarita (359 square miles) stretched from Oceanside to Aliso Creek. Name is being revived in current Rancho Santa Margarita development.*



California's first christening took place in Orange County on Rancho Mission Viejo, July 22, 1769, with baptism of two Indian babes.



On July 23, 1769, Portolá's men camped in San Juan Canyon, near future Mission Viejo adobe, and named site Santa María Magdalena.

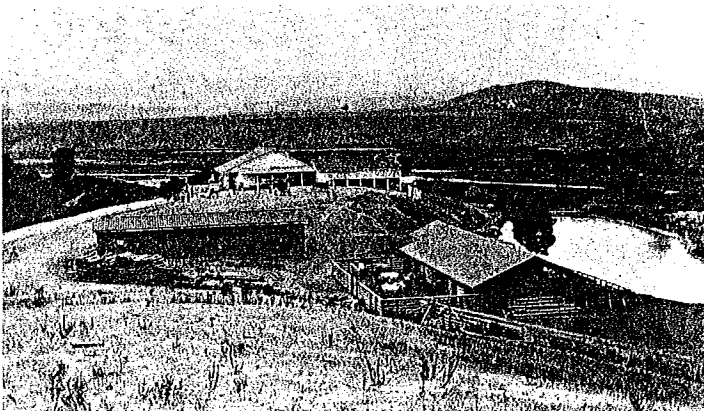
fortunes in the process. O'Neill vowed not to miss another. Somehow, the sight of Santa Margarita's slat-sided cows dining on parched stubble reminded him of his own odyssey.



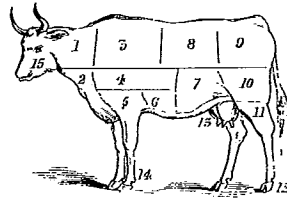
As a lad his family had fled Irish poverty to resettle on the rockbound coast of New Brunswick. There, in St. Andrews, the elder O'Neill, Patrick, found small demand for his skills as a butcher in a village devoted largely to fish. For his apprenticed son, it was a hard-scrabble life. By the time he was twenty Richard swore that he'd cleaned his last cod. Alone, he made his way down into Massachusetts to slave again in a Boston butcher shop. Here news reached him of the wondrous gold strike in California.

O'Neill caught the next ship.

*Begun prior to 1827 as an outpost of Mission San Luis Rey, Santa Margarita ranch house became home for three generations of O'Neills. Today it's part of Camp Pendleton.*



But weary months of grubbing along the Sacramento brought only a handful of dust and the conviction that California's real gold lay only in business. Returning to San Francisco, Richard resolutely opened a small meat market near the docks. Here his fortunes began to brighten. Successive shops found better locations, and bought him a home for the love of his life, an Irish wife, who bore him four children.



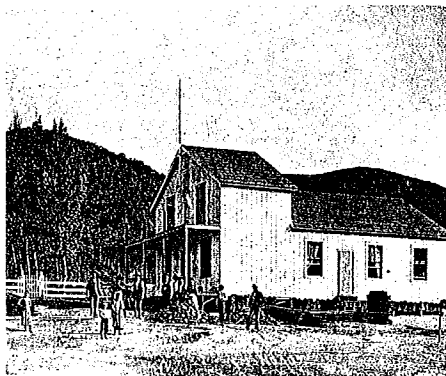
Most fortuitous, perhaps, was his early friendship with James C. Flood, another Irish immigrant. A former carriage-maker turned saloon-keeper, Flood bought O'Neill's meat for his Auction Lunch, and dabbled in stocks at the Mining Exchange across the street. While O'Neill's successes led to a modest meat-packing plant, Flood's fortunes soared astronomically. By clever stock manipulations he managed to corner the Comstock Lode, America's most famous silver mine.

Tempted by Flood's success, O'Neill also took a flier at the market. The result was instant disaster. To fend off complete ruin and save rent, he moved his California Meat Co. next door to his home, and started over from scratch. If the atmosphere taught his family a lesson in humility, it also brought them one of pride. By sheer toil and tenacity—some say bull-headedness—they saw their father scrap back to redeem both his debts and his reputation.

Impressed by O'Neill's grit, his friend James Flood asked him to look into a run-down ranch he'd repossessed in Merced County. Richard danced at the opportunity. He knew good beef, and within two years he knew how to raise them. So successful were the changes he wrought that the ranch was sold out from under him. As a tribute to

*Early 1900 family photo depicts Richard O'Neill, Jr. and Sr. (with grandson John Baumgartner on knee), Charles Hardy, and Jerome O'Neill at ranch headquarters.*

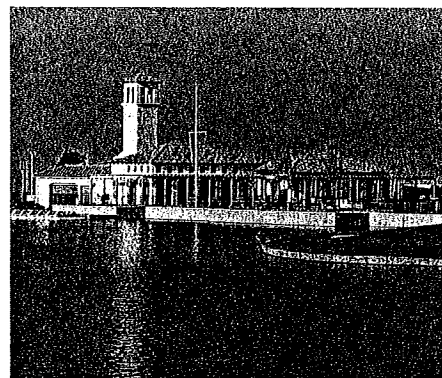




San Juan Hot Springs on Ortega Hwy. became Orange County's most popular spa. First hotel was built there in 1890 by Richard O'Neill, Sr.



Family members Alice O'Neill Avery, Richard J. O'Neill, Jerome Moiso, Tony Moiso and Marguerite O'Neill dedicate 1950 O'Neill Park plaque.



Beach Club on Lago Santa Margarita reflects early California style of urban village now unfolding on historic Trabuco Mesa.

O'Neill's skill as a manager, the new owner put him onto the Forster deal.

A week's survey in the saddle convinced Richard of the Santa Margarita's potential, and that no way in the world could he float it. The heirs wanted \$250,000 for the property; the banks nearly doubled that price with their notes. Still, God willing, he would have it! With Irish spunk he approached the one man he knew with that much cash—his old friend, the new "Silver King of Nevada."

Flood sized up the proposition, then sized up its suggestor. Tapping the ash from his cigar, he said, "Buy it!"

Attesting to their mutual respect, the deal was struck with a handshake. Both men were to become equal partners, Richard to work out his half at \$500 a month as resident manager. With a purchase price of \$457,000, it should have taken him 37 years. Knowing that he hadn't that many left, O'Neill vowed to trim the time with his share of the profits. Proof that he managed to do so is seen in the fact that he won full title to half the ranch in just 24 years!

It was an arduous quarter century. After installing his brood in the Santa Margarita's adobe ranch house—a relic from Pico's times—O'Neill took stock of its cattle. Holdovers from California's hide and tallow trade, they were small, tough and rangy. Even his *vaqueros* admitted that "They're good for almost anything but eating." To upgrade his herds, O'Neill imported Texas shorthorns, then put in feed lots and crops to sustain them

through the dry years. Mother Nature promptly responded with the two wettest winters in history.

Happier was the arrival of the Santa Fe. By 1888 it ran the length of the ranch. Recognizing that the railroad was a great cattle saver, O'Neill fought for his own sidings in order to ship his beef to better markets. During the 'nineties he reintroduced herds on the Mission Viejo which heretofore had grazed mostly sheep. He commissioned a tourist hotel at San Juan Hot Springs, which boomed with unexpected visitors, then suffered through a mining boom in Lucas Canyon, which sparked more brush fires than profit. He waged war on squatters and wild hogs in the San Mateo, and leased out Tra-



RICHARD JEROME O'NEILL  
ANTHONY R. MOISO  
ALICE O'NEILL AVERY

bucos Mesa to see it become Orange County's biggest wheat field.

Those who knew Richard O'Neill remembered him as an honest rancher, a man who drove both his men and a hard bargain. Perhaps his cowboys and tenants would have been less loyal had they not met a man who drove himself twice as hard.

Broken in health, O'Neill was past 80 in 1907 when James L. Flood, son of the "Silver King," made good his father's promise. Richard had, indeed, earned his half of the ranch by his labor. Four months later, O'Neill deeded his interests in the spread to his son, who assisted him as manager. In 1909 Jerome became so in fact.

Jerome O'Neill shared Richard's robust spirit, but in a frame handicapped by an early bout with polio. Loved by his cowboys, they joshed that "The *señor* wasn't fully dressed until he was in the saddle." Once astride a horse, they claimed, "He could ride like the Devil himself."

Hard-driving like his father, but tempered by more insight and humor, Jerome brought the ranch new direction. In return, Nature sent him a host of problems—everything from thistles to ticks—while the Depression added such man-made dilemmas as rum-runners and rustlers. Even so, during his 19-year tenure, the ranch prospered as never before. Fields of blackeyes and sugar beets now vied with grain crops and 15,000 head of cattle to become the big money-makers.

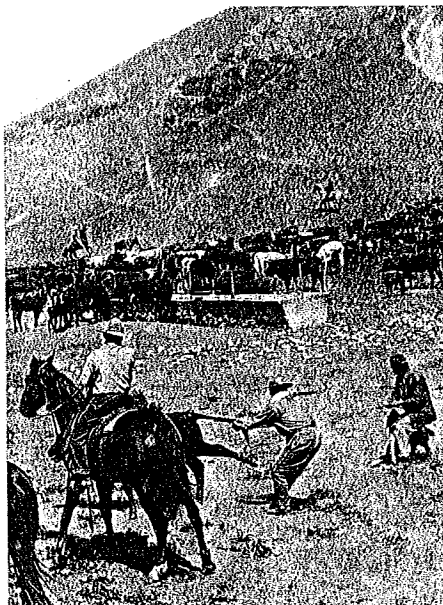
A sharp planner and shrewd poker-player, under Jerome the ranch reached its greatest extent—230,000 acres. In 1923 to consolidate their interests, Jerome and James L. incorporated under the name “The Santa Margarita Co.”

Ironically, what began as a second-generation friendship, ended abruptly in 1926 when both men died just two days apart.

Never married, Jerome established trusts for his sister, Mary (Mrs. John Baumgartner), and younger brother, Richard. While the Baumgartners loved ranching, Richard, Jr., felt more at home in San Francisco banking circles. The next dozen years saw a succession of interim managers whose efforts were largely dissipated by water litigation and ill-advised sales (now regretted) on the Mission Viejo. Among them were Bell Canyon (today an Audubon sanctuary and Caspers Park), the three mountain *potreros*, and Gobernadora Canyon (now Coto de Caza).

As the 'thirties closed, the Flood heirs, little disposed to ranching, elected to sell. An epic division of the Santa Margarita followed in 1940, the Floods and Baumgartners taking the lower portion, while Richard O'Neill, Jr.—by luck or foresight—retained the Orange County parcels. Owing to World War

*A vigorous horseman, Jerome O'Neill (left), personally supervised range activities on the Rancho Santa Margarita for over twenty years.*



II, within three years the Marine Corps would absorb the entire San Diego property for Camp Joseph H. Pendleton.

By 1941 what remained of the historic Santa Margarita became known as the Rancho Mission Viejo—much reduced, but still a substantial 52,000 acres. Living but two years to enjoy it, Richard, Jr., died, his interests passing to his widow, Marguerite, and their children, Alice and Richard Jerome O'Neill.

A descendant of Spanish stock which arrived in California in 1781, Marguerite also brought Rancho Mission Viejo's heritage full circle.

For over thirty years trusts established by Jerome O'Neill hamstrung full family control of the ranch. During the mid-forties, it was “Ama

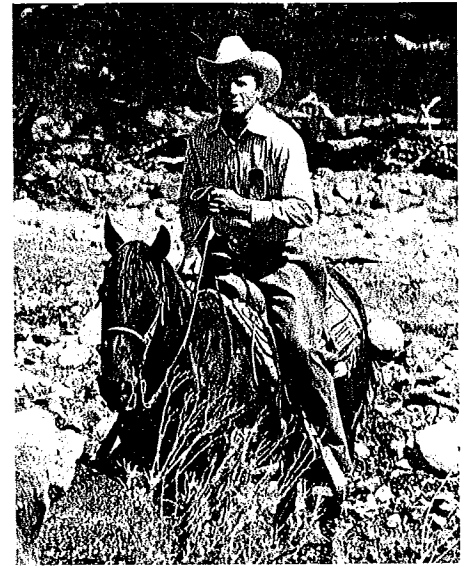
**O'NEILL  
BRANDS  
ON THE  
RANCHO  
MISSION  
VIEJO**



Daisy,” as Marguerite is fondly recalled, who personally “took on the bankers” to thwart several attempts to liquidate it completely. As tough-minded as she once was beautiful, she lived an astonishing 102 years, and is still venerated as the family heroine. By “Daisy's” dedication and devotion, she made possible the remarkable strides of the past two decades.

Today, Rancho Mission Viejo is still owned by members of the O'Neill family, while its operational entity, the Santa Margarita Company, is headed by Anthony R. “Tony” Moiso, great-grandson of Richard O'Neill, Sr.

Forced to modify its pastoral ways in the mid-sixties by Orange County's population explosion, the ranch's first residential venture was the



*Equally adept behind a saddle horn or desk, Anthony “Tony” Moiso, great-grandson of Richard O'Neill, Sr., today oversees all operations.*

10,000-acre planned community of Mission Viejo—since sold to Philip Morris, Inc. Subsequently, Moiso and his planners have faced an array of challenges—from creating new water districts to coping with freeways. Underway is their most impressive endeavor, the urban village of Rancho Santa Margarita on Trabuco Mesa. Far from neglecting the ranch's commercial activities, Moiso has diversified them from dry farming and mining to everything from race horses to aerospace.

Keeping pace with their personal achievements, the O'Neills have met their civic commitments with generous land donations for roads, schools and parks, and made personal ones to such things as the Old Mission's restoration and museums for local history.

Moreover, the ranch has retained its 200-year heritage by hosting such events as El Viaje de Portolá, spring round-ups and annual fandangos. Most importantly, the family has kept faith with its founder. Today, the ranch remains the last large-scale cattle operation in southern California.

As a new century approaches, having enjoyed eleven decades of successful ranch management, the O'Neill family reaffirms its pledge to build for a better future while preserving the best of an ever-colorful past.