Left to right, Josefa, Ignacio, Jr., Ysabel, Reginaldo and Ulipano del Valle, c. 1875.

Richard Griswold del Castillo

The del Valle Family and the Fantasy Heritage

In 1949 Carey McWilliams first used the term "Fantasy Heritage" to describe the Anglo-American's propensity to romanticize and mythify the white European, Spanish presence in the American Southwest.[1] McWilliams felt that the most damaging consequence of this heritage had been to rob the mestizos and Indians of their rightful historical importance. He wrote, "Los Angeles is merely one of many cities in the borderlands which has fed itself on a false mythology for so long that it has become a well-fattened paradox".[2] He cited as examples of this paradox numerous civic celebrations where Anglo-Americans eagerly identified with a pseudo-Spanish past while ignoring the Mexican-American barrios and colonias in their midst.

The blame for the creation of the Fantasy Heritage can be equally distributed among historians, novelists, real estate promoters, politicians and journalists. Less well understood is the role that the Californio landed classes and their descendants played in the development of this myth. The Californios were wealthy families who had been given large grants of land by the Spanish and Mexican governments. They considered themselves "Spanish" but in reality they were almost all mestizos, having a mixed cultural and racial heritage.[3] Under the Americans they lost their lands to lawyers, squatters and tax collectors. This article is about one Californio family, the del Valles, owners of Rancho Camulos and the role they played in popularizing a Fantasy Heritage in Southern California.

Nestled in the Santa Clara river valley near present day Oxnard and Ventura, Rancho Camulos in the 1880's, seemed to fit a romantic stereotype. Helen Hunt Jackson, the famous author of *Ramona,* visited this spot on January 23, 1883, at the suggestion of Antonio Coronel, an aging Los Angeles politico. He told Mrs. Jackson that the best example of early Californio life was to be found there. She stayed for about four hours and came away with enough impressions to accurately represent the ranch house and surrounding countryside in her novel. Later she wrote, ". . . it was a most interesting place, and the daughters, cousins and sons all as Mexican and un-American as heart could wish."[4] None of the elder del Valles were home when Mrs. Jackson visited and so she probably saw mostly Indians, mestizos and dark skinned relatives of the family. In her notes she called these people "Mexicans", not Californios.

From Camulos Mrs. Jackson traveled to San Diego and, after a brief stay, to New York City where she wrote the book that she hoped would save the remaining California mission Indians from extinction. A year after the book appeared in 1884, she died of cancer and so did not live to witness its phenomenal success. *Ramona* eventually went

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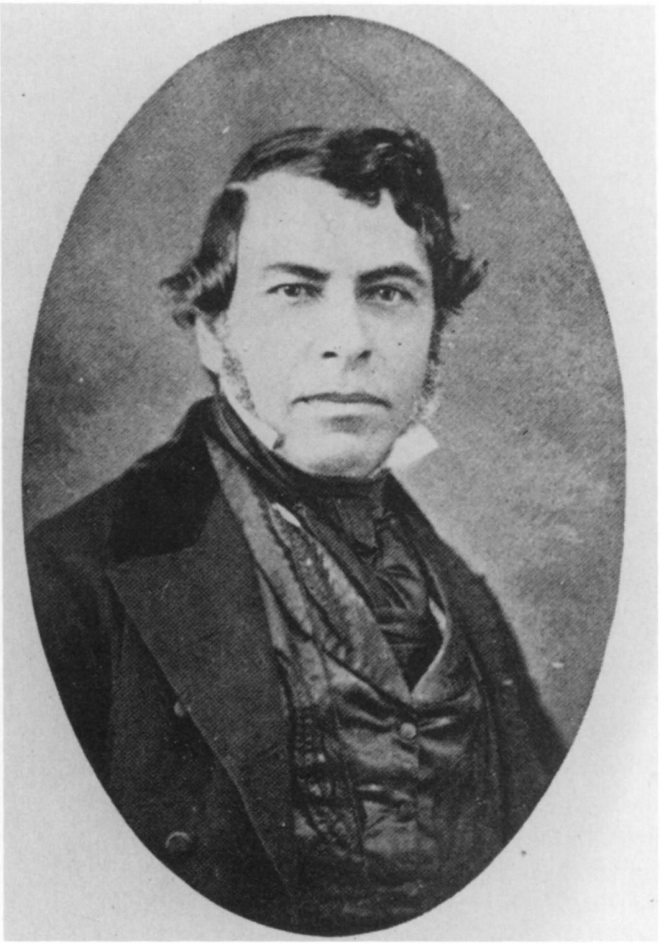

Ygnacio del Valle, the first owner of Rancho Camulos.

through 135 editions, was published in most languages and served as an inspiration for at least four movies and numerous plays. In the early 1900's the Los Angeles Public Library had 29 copies of the book and a waiting list for readers.[5]

The novel and the romanticism it engendered is credited with awakening interest in things "Spanish" in southern California and, as a result, the novel played a part in preserving the Franciscan missions and countless historical landmarks of the Mexican era. All this, it seems, grew out of Mrs. Jackson's impressions of rancho life in the Santa Clara Valley. But how well did the myth square with the reality?

Camulos in 1883 was one of the few remaining ranchos still owned and operated by native Californios. In 1930 the eldest son of the family, Reginaldo del Valle, wrote a history of his family's homestead.[6] Reginaldo's great grandfather, Antonio, had gotten the original grant of 11 square leagues from the Mexican government in 1839. He called it Rancho San Francisco. Reginaldo remembered that the mission Indians at the time protested the grant fearing bad treatment from their new master. After Antonio's death in 1841 the government divided the rancho among the heirs. Reginaldo's father Ygnacio got an 1800 acre parcel and called it Rancho Camulos. In his history Reginaldo neglected to mention that Pedro Carillo contested Rancho San Francisco's partition in 1841. Carillo filed an application for a portion of the grant with governor Alvarado. A year later governor Micheltorena ruled in Carillo's favor. The del Valles faced a loss of over 17,000 acres when the Mexican War broke out in 1846. A final settlement favoring the del Valles came in 1855 by the action of the California Board of Land Commissioners.[7]

Reginaldo's history of Camulos mentioned quaint and romantic details: the custom of burying a dead Indian child in the walls; a description of the family chapel furnished with bells from San Fernando Mission and vestments given by Bishop Mora; an account of how the first gold in California was discovered on the rancho in 1842; and most of all, remembrances of his mother as a self sacrificing, spiritual advisor to the Indians. Missing from Reginaldo's history was how the family had managed to hold on to Camulos despite droughts, falling cattle prices, shyster lawyers, ruinous taxes, prejudicial laws and greedy Anglos. Perhaps this was because the Camulos that Helen Hunt Jackson visited in 1883 and the Camulos that Reginaldo remembered in 1930 was in reality the creation of the American era. It bore little resemblance to the arcadian eden of pre-conquest California.

The del Valle family survived the economic disasters that wiped out other Californio rancheros by selling off portions of their land and by converting the rancho from cattle and sheep production to intensive industrial farming and viticulture. Before the Anglo conquest Ygnacio del Valle had acquired Ran-

cho El Tejon, and in 1857 he bought Rancho Temescal for $4,000. Through the years the gradual sale of these two ranchos and portions of the Camulos rancho furnished the needed capital to pay off the numerous mortgages Ygnacio contracted during the 1860s and 1870s.

In 1930 Reginaldo remembered that the original partition of Camulos had been for 1800 acres. Actually this had dwindled to 1340 acres by 1886.[8] As the del Valles sold portions of their rancho to stay solvent, the amazing thing was that Reginaldo and the family were not bitter about the erosion of their landed heritage. An explanation for this was that they were whole heartedly committed to finance capitalism and the new commercial ethic. Reginaldo was a lawyer and a well known politician with many Anglo-American friends. The del Valle children who married, all married Anglo-Americans. The family perhaps felt that it was receiving psychic income from Reginaldo's political prominence and the fame generated by Helen Hunt Jackson and later by Charles Fletcher Lummis. More than this Reginaldo and his family really respected and admired the capitalists who bought portions of their ranch, Henry Newhall and William Wolfskill; and the land was appreciating in value at a fantastic rate.

Much has been made about the "typically Spanish" architecture of the Camulos adobe — a style that has inspired imitators among real estate subdividers and land speculators down through the decades. Actually 16 of the 20 rooms of the adobe home were built after 1850.[9] A demand for cattle in the gold fields of the north made possible the wealth that financed construction. This prosperity came to an abrupt halt in 1863 when a drought almost wiped them out. In a letter to Joseph Lancaster Brent, a long time friend of the family, Ygnacio reported that he had lost about half of his herd and that he had had to sell portions of his interests in Rancho San Francisco for $21,000.[10] He sold these lands to a San Francisco based petroleum company with the hope that their exploratory wells would come in and raise the value of the remainder of his land. In his letter to Brent, he didn't mention that his property taxes had risen 200 percent or that he had had to slaughter all his sheep to keep them from suffering.

The disasters of 1862-1863 spelled an end to the Californio owned cattle industry. Seeing that this was so, Ygnacio turned to citrus agriculture, one of the first to do so in Ventura County. He borrowed large sums to invest in fruit and nut trees and wine grapes.[11] To supplement income while waiting for full production he leased out grazing lands to local ranchers. Nevertheless, expenses constantly outran income and Ygnacio took out a series of mortgages to remain solvent, one to Newhall in 1876 for $10,000 at 3 percent a year and another, a few years later, for $15,776 at 6 percent per year.[12]

There were many expenses. Besides the extended family of legitimate and adopted children, aunts and uncles that numbered 20 persons, almost 200 Indians and Mexicans lived on the rancho. Ygnacio believed in parochial education and at considerable expense he sent all of his children to high schools in Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. His sons, Reginaldo and Ulipano, both attended Santa Clara College. Reginaldo studied several years in San Francisco to become a lawyer. Later, when Reginaldo ran for his first political office, an assembly seat, the family borrowed $2,000 at 6 percent to pay for his campaign. His later political career probably also put the family deeper into debt.

Despite these expenses and due to costly investments, Camulos became a show place of the new agricultural revolution that was beginning in California. Politicians and promoters began visiting the rancho to praise its productive capacity and beauty.

In 1875 the *Weekly Press* wrote, "The del Valle mansion is a long substantial adobe with wings enclosing three sides of a courtyard. To the rear is a large fountain in which there are many goldfish. Leading out of the gardens is an arbor of grape vines now heavily loaded with luscious fruit. In this garden we saw pomegranate and orange and lemon trees full of half ripe fruit and a tree which would have puzzled an expert to tell the variety, for it had apples, pears and quinces hanging from its limbs. In the large orchard are 4,000 almond trees . . . The improvements made by Don del Valle are one of a substantial character. His wine house, covering a cellar of the same dimensions, is 132 feet long and 36 feet wide, and is built of brick at a cost of $10,000 and is furnished with all the modern improvements".[13] Del Valle's winery produced 40,000 gallons a year and Camulos wines and brandies were well known throughout Southern California ten years before Helen Hunt Jackson arrived.

In 1877 two local Ventura politicians reported that "Comulos (*sic*) is evidently destined to become one of the leading health resorts of the state. It is easily reached in a very few hours from either the seaport at Ventura or the railroad at Newhall. The proprietor is thinking of erecting a commodious hotel for the accomodation (*sic*) of the many visitors who, hearing of the far famed orchards and vineyards, come daily to visit them."[14]

In 1878 Ygnacio retired and turned the management of the farm over to Joventino, Reginaldo's brother. Later in 1886 Ulipano, the other brother, took over. Ulipano got involved in raising race horses. Supposedly he reinvested his winnings in the rancho but by 1900 he turned to raising mules.

The del Valles' success story was largely due to intelligent efficient management and luck. The luck was that Ygnacio had acquired enough land in flush times to pay for conversion of the cattle ranch to intensive agriculture. The del Valle brothers provided the efficient management. Reginaldo handled the family's legal and financial affairs. Ulipano and Joventino managed the wine and citrus industry.

Reginaldo, the eldest son, was the leader of the family after his father's retirement and death in 1892. He engaged in a variety of real estate and business ventures to supplement the family income. His legal maneuvers and political contacts undoubtedly helped. After he passed the bar exam in 1877, he bought Rancho Jamacha and Rancho de los Coches in San Diego.[15] In 1886 he formed a partnership with Tom Temple, *La Crónica's* business manager, to form the California and Mexican Land Company. The main transaction of this firm seems to have been the marketing and selling of the family's Rancho Temescal for $66,695.[16] In 1908 Reginaldo set up a corporation to manage Rancho Camulos. Shares in the company were to be held in trust and income distributed to members of the family. The corporation hired a new manager when Ulipano moved away a short time later.[17]

The image of a group of well educated Californios managing the affairs of a middle sized agribusiness corporation hardly squares with the *Ramona* characterizations of the Californio culture. But then, the novel was not intended to accurately portray Californio life in the late nineteenth century. More important was the fact that readers of the book thought that it did. This proved to be a boon to real estate promoters during the 1880s.

At first the del Valles didn't like the book. In the novel Señora Moreno, the matriarch of the rancho,

Reginaldo del Valle as a young lawyer in his late twenties.

A group of workers and their families pose on the veranda of the Camulos Adobe.

was a haughty woman, cruel to the local Indians. The del Valles resented this characterization of their beloved mother, Isabel. Reginaldo del Valle was supposed to be Don Felipe, half brother to the half breed Ramona, and he must have been upset when Helen Hunt Jackson had him marrying the Indian girl at the end of the book.

Soon after the novel appeared, curious tourists began showing up at Camulos. Edward Roberts of the *San Francisco Chronicle* visited the rancho and quoted the del Valles as saying, ". . . Many who come here do not believe that we are not the ones they wish to see."[18] Tourists sometimes ran rampant over the grounds entering into the private rooms of the adobe demanding "Ramony, Ramony, where is Ramony."[19] By 1896 four passenger trains a day passed by Camulos and on February 12 one was delayed near the rancho for 20 minutes. The *Examiner* reported, ". . . a mob of 300 of both sexes took advantage of the opportunity to raid the orchards as thoroughly and steal as many oranges as the time would permit, even invading the private grounds and apartments of the house."[20] A few days later Ulipano published a notice prohibiting further tourists from entering the grounds. Reginaldo, who hadn't lived there since 1877, was quick to see the possibility for profit. He told a *Ventura Free Press* reporter that he was going to build a 40 room Ramona Hotel overlooking the rancho. In 1887 Reginaldo appealed to his long time political enemy Charles Crocker to establish a Southern Pacific station house and appoint an agent at Camulos.[21] The same year Reginaldo and a group of Californios met with a group of Anglo-Americans and founded the Ramona Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West, a fraternal organization dedicated to the ". . . perpetuation of the

A re-enactment of the first meeting of Ramona and Alessandro on the Camulos Rancho. The parts were played by residents of Camulos for the benefit of tourists.

romantic and patriotic past."[22] One of their first items of business was to rename an old oak tree on the rancho, "The Oak of the Golden Dream."

As wave upon wave of tourists descended on Camulos, Reginaldo's mother continued to welcome all strangers, giving away food, souvenirs and often putting them up for the night. In one year she provided meals and lodging for about 2,500 people. Reginaldo finally had to instruct his mother to ". . . tell the tourists who come out of curiosity to see Ramona that we don't have a hotel and we can't put them up except in unusual circumstances."[23]

The del Valle hospitality furnished good primary material for guidebooks and promoters who were enchanted with Spanish arcadia. In 1888 Walter Lindley wrote a detailed account of Camulos' annual Fourth of July fiesta. On this occasion the family celebrated a combined Mexican and American Independence day. The guests arrived by train. Señora del Valle welcomed them at the entrance to the garden. A servant showed them to their rooms to freshen up. Then lunch was announced where Senator del Valle presided. The meal consisted of roast pig, various "Spanish" dishes, chiles, olives, a dessert, claret and white wine and black coffee. The afternoon's program consisted of horseback riding, walking, hunting, singing, reading, mountain climbing or sleeping. They served dinner at 7:00 p.m. in the arbor brightly lit with lanterns. A roast kid meal and groaning board was preceded by a musical interlude with piano, organ and guitar with song. The day ended with a fireworks display.[24] The del Valles had fiestas like this two or three times a year. They usually lasted from three to five days with as many as 100 guests arriving and departing by train.

After 1890 Camulos became less of a tourist attraction when a number of authorities on local history began to question whether Camulos and the del Valles were in fact the inspiration for the *Ramona* novel. The major competitor was San Diego. Fr. Antonio Ubach of Mission San Diego maintained that he had known Ramona personally and that she had been the child of a local Spanish grandee and ". . . one of the most intelligent mission Indians."[25] Fr. Ubach felt that Helen Hunt Jackson had omitted certain sordid details in the Ramona story. The San Diego Indians claimed Ramona as their own, wanting to get a piece of the Fantasy Heritage. Condido Hopkins, an Indian Service Chief of Police on the Cahuilla Indian reservation told reporters that Ramona was his mother. In the 1890s she frequently was an exhibition at the San Bernardino Orange Show.[26] Cave Couts, a local San Diego rancher, held that Ramona was really a Temecula Indian girl he had known, named Matutini.[27] The Santa Fe Rail Road advertised that the rancho inspiring the novel was not Camulos, which was near the Southern Pacific Line, but Rancho Guajome, located four and one half miles from their tracks near Mission San Luis Rey and Oceanside. Mr. A. McWhirter, owner of the rancho, offered to conduct tours of Ramona's adobe for interested tourists.[28]

Of course, the Ventura and Los Angeles county promoters preferred their version, Camulos was the site and Ramona was a composite character drawn from the real life stories of Blanca Yndart and an Indian girl Guadalupe. According to legend Blanca was an orphaned Spanish girl who had been given as a ward to Senora del Valle. Her mysterious father had entrusted a dowry to the safekeeping of the family. Secretly Isabel kept these "Ramona Jewels" under

her bed until Blanca got married. Guadalupe was a mission Indian also given to the del Valles by a Saboba Indian chief.[29] A variation of this theme was the opinion that *Ramona* had been inspired by a love affair between an American girl and a local Indian named Ramon Corralez. Forbidden to marry they had run off into the mountains where Ramon had been murdered for horse stealing.

In the spring of 1884 Charles Fletcher Lummis walked into Los Angeles after a cross country hike from Ohio, via the Southwest. He was to play a major role in developing the Fantasy Heritage beyond a sterile debate over places, names and dates. A Harvard educated son of a Methodist minister, he got a job with the *Los Angeles Times* and fell in love with the Californio past.[30] He became a good friend of the del Valles and entertained them frequently. When he discovered that Mission San Fernando was being used as a hog farm, he enlisted Reginaldo and the family to head a committee to restore it. Lummis and Reginaldo founded the Landmarks Club in 1887 to preserve old Californio places. Lummis built his home, El Arisal, in Arroyo Seco, a structure that is a mixture of Eastern masonry with Californio shapes, and set about to preserve the fast fading Californio past. After a period of temporary blindness and nervous exhaustion he recuperated at Camulos where he fell in love with Juventino del Valle's daughter. In a gesture befitting the novel *Ramona*, the family forbid the marriage, not because "Don Carlos" was an Indian but because he was a divorced man. Lummis later wrote, ". . . The old folks were like parents to me. The romance, the traditions, the customs of Camulos are all familiar and all dear to me — not merely because they are Camulos but because that was the Last Stand of the patriarchal life of Spanish California, which was so beautiful to the world for more than a century."[31]

In 1924 the del Valle corporation sold Rancho Camulos for three million dollars to a Swiss albino, August Rubel, who hoped to explore for oil. The Fantasy Heritage was thus cashed in for a handsome profit.

Although Camulos was gone, the del Valles, and Reginaldo in particular, continued to act out the drama of the past. Reginaldo gave countless speeches for local historical associations, chambers of commerce and Rotary Clubs in Ventura, Los Angeles and Riverside counties. He continued to meet with the descendants of the Jayhawkers during their annual celebrations of their rescue by Ygnacio at Camulos in 1849. Reginaldo and his daughter, Lucretia, were important sponsors of John S. McGroarty's Mission Play. This was a romantic dramatization of *Ramona* performed yearly at Mission San Gabriel. A number of Californios, including the del Valles held stock in the Mission Play Association and loaned money for productions.[32] For years Lucretia played Ramona and Reginaldo drove over visiting political dignitaries to see her perform.[33] The Mission Play ran for 20 years and won a commendation from the Pope because it portrayed Franciscan missionaries in a good light.

The Fantasy Heritage played no small part in Reginaldo's long political career. When he first ran for Congress in 1884 the Democrats touted him as the noblest expression of the Spanish race. The San Francisco *Golden Sun* described him as ". . . born under a Southern Sun, tanned in Spanish hue by its semi-tropic rays, with hair as black as a raven's wing, with eyes dark and piercing, sparkling like an eagle's . . . a true child of Southern California. The blood of Spaniards flows in his veins, royal blood, and he is one of the descendants of the native Alta Californians who achieved distinction."[34] Reginaldo's defeat in this election proved that there were practical limits to romanticism. His opponent saw through the Spanish claptrap, called him a Mexican and maintained

The Santa Clara River Valley with Rancho Camulos in the foreground.

". . . no decent man has ever been born of a Mexican woman."[35] Evidently when it came to meaningful political power, even the most Spanish Californio would have to be happy with being a figurehead.

After his defeat Reginaldo served as a delegate to numerous State Democratic Conventions and was an elector in virtually every presidential election. Introduced to President Grover Cleveland as "a native son and Spanish scholar," Reginaldo was offered and refused three diplomatic posts.[36] Perhaps he recognized that he had no talent for diplomacy. His appointment in 1913 as Woodrow Wilson's personal representative to Mexico proved that he was right. Being a bilingual Californio and a personal friend of William Jennings Bryan were the only two qualifications he possessed for the job. His mission to Mexico was a total disaster from the beginning to end mainly because of his diplomatic inexperience.[37] In 1914, Reginaldo returned to Los Angeles and resumed his long tenure as president of the Public

A view of the courtyard of the Camulos Adobe with a few of the citrus trees planted by Ygnacio del Valle.

Service Board, which later became the Los Angeles Board of Water and Power.

Through an accident of history, Reginaldo del Valle literally presided over the triumph of urban industrial society and the physical destruction of what was left of his Californio past. For years, he was a close friend of the eccentric genius William Mulholland, Los Angeles' Chief Water Engineer. Working closely with Mulholland he had helped construct the Owens Valley project, an endeavor which provoked dynamitings, ridicule and protracted legal battles.[38] Throughout the 1920s del Valle and the other four members of the Board unanimously passed every proposal Mulholland put before them.[39]

Reginaldo and Bill Mulholland shared a common vision — that of creating a water system that would ensure the urban growth of Los Angeles. During the 1920s this involved constructing a system of reservoirs and dams. One of these projects was the St. Francis Dam located in the San Francisquito canyon. Mulholland, a self educated hydrologist, had personally overseen the construction. When the dam began to spring leaks early in March, 1928, he considered it normal for projects of this type. The night of March 12, the St. Francis Dam crumbled. A mountain of water, mud and concrete rushed down the canyon

and onto the Santa Clara River Valley. The next day 450 people lay dead, buried in the mud. Damage to the land and structures approached 20 million dollars. Rancho Camulos, of course, lay in the path of the flood. While not completely destroyed, the rancho suffered damages to crops, trees and structures of well over 300,000 dollars.[40] Whole families, many of them long time friends of the del Valles, perished. The St. Francis Dam disaster must have been a deeply personal tragedy to the del Valle family.

The Californios have frequently been accused of isolating themselves from the Mexican immigrant community in Los Angeles. Considering themselves "Spanish" they looked with scorn on the thousands of working class mestizo and Indian immigrants who flooded Los Angeles in the decades after the Mexican Revolution of 1910. This was not the case with Reginaldo del Valle. He maintained a close friendship with Mexican leaders he had met during his mission to Mexico, like José M. Maytorrena, a former governor of Sonora who had moved to Los Angeles in the 1920s. He occasionally represented Spanish speaking immigrants in the courts.[41] In 1912 he briefly represented General Caryl Ap Rhys Pryce, the former revolutionary leader in Baja California who had captured Tijuana for the Partido Liberal Mexicano.[42] Reginaldo was also active in forming the San Gabriel Spanish American League. While middle class in composition, it represented an influential body of the newly arrived Spanish speaking immigrants.[43] In 1925 del Valle was awarded a Medal of Merit by the Liga Protectiva Latina for his services to the Mexican-American community. The Liga was in the vanguard of defending the rights of the Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles during this period.[44]

On September 21, 1938 Reginaldo del Valle died of a heart attack, and the *Los Angeles Times* and *La Opinion* both carried laudatory accounts of his career. The *Times* highlighted his political successes and noted that he had always disliked being called "Spanish."[45] *La Opinion's* obituary mentioned his daughter Lucretia's prominent role in McGroarty's Mission Play and claimed that he had been the first to conceive of the storage reservoir system for metropolitan Los Angeles.[46] Reginaldo del Valle's life and career was an example of how the upper class Mexicanos in California managed to survive and even prosper during the early decades of the American era. True, they exchanged a romanticized view of the past for future political and economic power, and this is perhaps the most serious criticism of them. But after all they were fighting to maintain their self respect in difficult and changing times. Californios, like Reginaldo, really believed in the myth they were helping to create. Perhaps the prominence given to the few surviving Californios fulfilled the needs of the millions of rootless immigrants who migrated to California after 1880. The Fantasy Heritage, after all, gave these newcomers a ready made tradition with which they could identify. From the Californio point of view this same fantasy made it possible for Mexicanos and Angle-Americans to coexist with some degree of mutual respect.

All of the photographs used throughout this article are courtesy of the Ventura County Historical Society and Museum.

Two views of the Santa Clara River Valley after the St. Francis Dam disaster.

Notes

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