

THE LOPEZ HOMESTEAD

WILLIAM M. BOWEN

The Lopez Homestead, located in Lopez Canyon—a part of the larger Penasquitos Canyon Preserve—is a turn-of-the- (20th) century dairy ranch site, little known, little studied, little understood, and often overshadowed by more well known ranches. Recent archival research, along with site surveys and oral history material, has uncovered many new facts and insights which lead to a better understanding of this site.

INTRODUCTION

The Lopez Homestead (CA-SDI-8120H) is located in Lopez or Cuervo(Crow) Canyon, part of the larger Penasquitos Canyon Preserve. The homestead was an important dairy farm at the turn of the 20th century, operated by a descendent of one of the early notable and influential Spanish families of Old Town. It has been little studied and much misunderstood, but it has the potential to teach us much (Giles 1993). Like the nearby El Cuervo Adobe and Pierre Bovet Adobe, the Lopez Homestead has fallen into a sorry state of deterioration and is in urgent need of attention.

Recently uncovered historical and archaeological materials, along with oral histories provided by knowledgeable informants, have helped lead to a better understanding of the Lopez Homestead. Clarification of the history and layout of the homestead should result in wider recognition, improved stewardship, excavation, and perhaps eventually some form of reconstruction and/or interpretative signage for the site.

ORIGIN OF THE HOMESTEAD

Many conflicting stories have surfaced surrounding the origin of the Lopez Homestead. Local naturalist Barbara Moore claimed that Lopez Canyon had been a land grant to Bonifacio Lopez in 1840 (Hewitt & Moore 1989). Dr. John Northrop, a former Scripps Institute of Oceanography geophysicist, also claimed that the Lopez property was granted to Bonifacio Lopez in the 1840s, by Pio Pico (Northrop 1992). However, no such land grant has been found, nor is it listed

in any of the commonly consulted sources (e.g., Brackett 1960; Cowan 1956). In addition, Ralph J. Giles, Jr.(1993) has provided evidence that the Bonifacio Lopez house and property were in Soledad Valley, not in Lopez Canyon. Furthermore, township survey maps from 1876 and 1884 do not show any house, structure, or road in Lopez Canyon, militating against an 1840 ranch site.

But what was the origin of the Lopez Homestead? Giles did not offer an hypothesis, nor did the archaeologists who surveyed the site in 1979 (Fink et al.). Other historians and archaeologists have concluded that this was not a historic ranch site at all (Kelly 2002).

However, plat maps of San Diego from 1892 and 1911 show Ramon Lopez as the owner of the property in question, suggesting that he was on the land from at least 1892. After much searching, the answer was found in Patent Homestead Grants Book #5, which showed that the Lopez homestead was a Federal Patent Land Grant given in 1895 to Ramon Lopez (with a date of original settlement in 1890).

THE LOPEZ FAMILY

The first Lopez in San Diego was Ignacio Lopez, a leatherjacket soldier stationed at the Presidio. Ignacio was elected to public office in 1822 and participated in the rebellion at the Presidio in 1831 with his sons, Juan and Jose (Pourade 1963). Ignacio's son Juan built the famous Casa de Lopez in Old Town and a daughter, Eustaquia, was the mother of Pio Pico. Bonifacio Lopez, another son, built an adobe and a large corral on the hill of the Presidio. Bonifacio was an excellent and renowned horseman,

nicknamed "The King." His corral, in Old Town, was called *El Corral del Rey* (Pourade 1963).

In 1835, Bonifacio was appointed *Juez de Campo* (Judge of the Countryside) to oversee rodeos and settle disputes over ownership of cattle (Davidson 1931). In 1840, he was placed in charge of the Mission by Philip Crosswaite, a noted early San Diego Sheriff and tax collector, who had married one of Bonifacio's daughters. In 1850, he was elected to the first grand jury and in 1853 purchased Francisco Alvarado's legal interest in Soledad Valley (4,438 acres) through Cave Couts, and built a country adobe there.

Bonifacio had a total of 11 children. One son, Jose Ramon, was born in 1846 in San Juan Capistrano and later educated at the Old Town School. Around 1890, Jose Ramon built a wooden house in Lopez Canyon and started a dairy farm. He ran the farm until his death in 1931. His wife's name was Duarte Soledad (Davidson 1931). They had three children: Henrietta (b.1878), Ramon, Jr. (b.1880), and Susie (b.1895).

After Jose Ramon died, Ramon, Jr. took over the ranch and lived there with his two sisters. None of them ever married. Ramon, Jr. was known to be a superb rider, gifted with his hands, but lacking in any formal education (McCoy 1993). His sister Susie, who contracted polio, died in 1947. Ramon, Jr. himself died in 1953. Shortly after that, Henrietta moved downtown to live with a relative on Island Street, leaving the homestead deserted. She died in 1955.

HOMESTEAD FEATURES

THE LOPEZ HOUSE

The Lopez house was built entirely of wood in about 1890. There is no indication that adobe was a part of the construction materials; nor does there appear to be an older adobe building underneath the wooden house. The house was occupied until about 1953. Apparently it blew down in a fierce storm in the 1960s, while it was uninhabited.

At present the house site consists of piles of boards and roofing material strewn about the still-intact porch and washroom. The shape of the house can be determined by how the wood is

lying about the ground. Various household items such as a bed frame, an old door lock, and car parts have been noted around the site by the author since 1989.

The house foundation measures 6.4 m x 12.8 m, providing 82 square meters of living space. It appears to have been built onto over the years. A careful search through the fallen wood reveals both round and the older square nails. The cement porch (2.74 m x 12.8 m) and the wash room (3.35 m x 2.43 m) were added in the 1950s when Ramon, Jr. was in his 70s. The initials "JPEC" and the name "Ramon Lopez" are written in cement on the washroom wall. "Ramon Lopez" and the Spanish word *entiendeme*, meaning "understand me," are written on the cement steps leading up to the porch.

There are two pepper trees (*Schinus molle*) to the west side of the house, offering shade and a wind block. There was a tall cypress tree in front of the house as late as 1979; it has since fallen (Fink et al. 1979). Northrop (2002) says that Ramon, Jr. would tie his horse up to the cypress. He also recalls that there were remnants, in the early 1970s, of a white picket fence that surrounded the house. Down in front of the house, near the creek, there is a large stand of cactus (*Opuntia megacantha*). West of the house are two century plants (*Agave deserti*), which may have been planted by the Lopez family.

THE LOPEZ BARN

Just east of the house is a large gully. In 1989, there were remains of small wire pens for chicken and pigs here. These are gone now, buried or washed away by a growing runoff problem. Although Giles (1993), in his appraisal of the homestead, proposed that the barn site was east of the house, Northrop (2002) suggests rightly that this was the site of a small barn. Northrop has in his possession a 1940 painting by artist Allen Rothero of Ramon Lopez, Jr. standing in front of the barn. In the painting there is a tree to the right of house which could be the large eucalyptus found there today.

Under the eucalyptus there are currently two rain furrows about 30-60 cm deep. A recent examination revealed rusted pieces of metal, large nails, part of a leather saddle, and a very crude, old soda bottle labeled "Silver Gate Soda Works."

Several years ago, the El Niño rains exposed, at the bottom of the hillside and right next to the tree, a wagon harness and some tools. There is also a large pile of wood down in front of the eucalyptus tree which may have come from the barn.

Milking Station

An old road runs east past the Lopez House. About 137 meters up the road, on its south side, is a raised-mound area built into the side of the hill, measuring about 13.7 m x 20.7 m. Giles (1993) called this the barn site, but Northrop (2002) says this was a milking station. There are three rectangular cement slabs on the mound. Almost all of the wood from the structure is gone. A blacksmith-wrought wood brace was recently discovered here. Close by there is also a "U"-shaped concrete drain sluice and another small alternative exit road going up the hill which Northrop says was used when the creek was too swollen from rains to cross.

ORCHARD

The orchard is located southwest of Lopez Creek and the Lopez home. As of 2002, only five trees are left alive in the orchard: two quince, two pear, and one apricot. The Lopez family may have planted the trees for fresh fruit and preserves, to eat or to sell. The fruits and leaves of the trees may also have been used for medicine, as they are in the pharmacopoeia of traditional Spanish folk medicine. But a better explanation for the orchard is that it was planted as an "improvement," which was required for homesteaders to retain their title (Northrop 2002).

We do not know for sure when the orchard was planted. It had to have been after 1890, the given date of original settlement. On a 1928 aerial photograph, about 30 trees are visible. They look mature and lush, suggesting the trees were planted at least 10-20 years earlier. Most of the trees in the orchard died between 1928 and 1945. This may have been due to natural causes such as pests, fire, drought, or just lack of care, because they were considered of less importance than the dairy cattle. A 1945 aerial photograph shows only about six of the pear trees remaining, in 1975 there were four or five, and by 1989 only two were left (Moore 2002; Northrop 2002).

THE OLD LOPEZ ROAD

The Old Lopez Road is a dirt road leading up and out of Lopez Canyon to the south, over the top of Mira Mesa. The road was built, according to Allen Rothero (as told to John Northrop), because of a water-rights dispute between the Lopez family and the El Cuervo Alvarado family. The Alvarados wanted to share Lopez's water, Lopez would not share. In retaliation, Diego Alvarado put up a fence to keep Lopez from using the road that crossed over his land to get to Soledad Valley. Hence, Lopez had to construct a road to get out of the canyon.

Unfortunately, this very interesting explanation for the Old Lopez Road begins to break down upon closer analysis. In reality, Lopez had hardly enough water for himself, let alone enough to share. In fact, as Giles (1993) has suggested, this is the important question—how did Lopez find enough water for his own family and his herd?

It appears that the real reason the road was built was to get to the ponds up on the mesatop. There are three of them, and they appear to have held water year-round. Bruce Coons (2002), Christian Clews (2002), and John Northrop (2002) all report that in the 1970s there still was water in these ponds all year (the ponds were lost to development in the 1980s). There may well have been a conflict between the Lopez and Alvarado families, but access to the ponds seems the most likely explanation for the Old Lopez Road.

Northrop (1999) also reports that the road was built in one summer with picks and shovels and a team of horses pulling a hand-guided scoop. The road goes through an important and recognized geological area—a microfossil-laden Ardath Shale formation (Northrop 1997).

Prior to this research we knew only that the road had been built after 1884 (a survey map of this date did not show the road) and before 1928 (it can be seen on an aerial photograph of this date). We now know that the road was built after 1890, the date of settlement, and before 1903, the date of a topographic map which shows the road. This research has also made us aware that the road bifurcated about halfway to the top; the right-hand loop had previously been obscured by an overgrowth of lemonade berry (*Rhus integrifolia*).

It is proposed that the right fork was a shorter way over the mesa and down into the Soledad Valley town of Sorrento, which had a general store, post office, and railroad stop at which to load livestock and milk destined for San Diego. The left fork in the Lopez Road led up to the corrals and other structures associated with the ponds and then continued down into Soledad (Carroll) Canyon, past the Bovet farm, where Jose Ramon's sister Providencia lived with her husband Pierre Bovet.

MESA-TOP CORRALS

Also prior to this research, no connection had been made between the mesa-top ranching complex site known as SDI-5161 and the Lopez Homestead. However, it now appears that SDI-5161 was actually part of the Lopez Homestead. It was surveyed in 1979 (McCoy) and the survey updated in 1981 (Jacques and Theskin). The site includes two structural foundations (probably a shed and an open, garage-like structure); two cisterns or water tanks—one cement, the other corrugated tin; a pit for an outhouse; and two reservoirs or ponds, as well as historic trash and other debris.

The site can be seen on the 1903 topographical map and is visible on the 1928 aerial map. Northrop and Clews both report that this was a cattle-holding area, and the ponds were still in use for cattle in the middle 1970s. Clews says he has photographs of Norwood Brown's horses in the ponds. There was a third, much larger reservoir to the west which Northrop says was also used. The cattle were probably brought up here for grazing and watering, especially in the dry months. The ponds, which provided plenty of water, are visible on the 1967 Geological Survey Map for Del Mar, California.

SMOKEHOUSE

Northrop recently cleared some exotic brush to reveal the remains of a smokehouse, marked by a cement slab, about 23 meters northwest of the milking station. (Giles [1993], in contrast, proposed that this locus was associated with feeding or watering livestock.)

The cement foundation measures 2.4 m x 2.7 m and has a small cement platform in the middle,

about 38 cm x 46 cm, and 18 cm high. There are four 0.6-m metal studs in the corners of the platform. There is also some wood strewn about. Northrop says Allan Rothero told him that Ramon Lopez, Jr. cut off the sycamore trees along the creek bed at shoulder height to stoke the smokehouse. The cuts and regrowth are still visible in some of the trees which line the creek today.

THE CISTERN

The Lopez cistern is located on a hill northwest of the house. It is at a higher elevation to make use of gravity to bring water to the house. It is above ground, six-sided, 2.1 meters tall, and 1.2 meters wide, with walls about 14 centimeters thick. When full, it can hold 8,128 cubic centimeters of water. It is made of concrete with embedded river cobbles and has a pipe hole on the bottom of the east side. The south side shows signs of repair. The bolts on top, and wood scattered about, indicate that it had a wooden cover at one time. The north side has Ramon and Heinretta Lopez's names on it and the date, October 25, 1947. The style of lettering is similar to that on the steps and wall of the wash room. Until recently there was a 7.6-cm-diameter pipe sticking 0.9 meters out of the ground by the cistern. Northrop says that the cistern had a float inside attached to a pulley which raised a wood flag when it was near empty.

The flag could be easily seen from the house. Northrop (1999) also says that Ramon Lopez, Jr. used a mobius belt on the power takeoff of his tractor motor to pump water from a seep in the embankment above the creek up to the cistern. When needed, the water could be turned on to flow down to the house.

STONE WALL

The 1979 site survey of the Homestead by Fink et al. described a stone wall in the creek embankment just east of the house; the wall is now gone. It probably diverted the creek more toward the house and kept it in the proper stream bed. It may have been associated with the spot where the Old Lopez Road crossed the creek to the house.

THE LOPEZ DUMP

Recently the site of the Lopez Trash Dump was found, with the help of Dr. Northrop. It is located out near the little-traveled, northeastern end of the property. The surface scatter includes many rusted cans, broken glass, a lantern hanger, a milking pail, a cooking pot, a large piece of metal, a smoke flume, etc., in an area about 18 meters x 27 meters. Probably many more artifacts are buried beneath the surface. There are many pieces of Gallo wine bottles and whisky bottles with an embossed rose design. One completely intact bottle with the cap was noted. According to Bunny Clews (2002), Ramon Lopez, Jr. was a heavy drinker in his later years and liked "Red Roses"-brand whisky.

BACK FENCE LINE

At the back of the property is a 2.5-cm-diameter cable that crosses part of the creek and connects up to a series of barbed-wire fence posts. This was the back part of the Lopez property. Northrop (1999) says this fence line went all the way across the canyon at one time.

WINDMILL WELL

The 1903 topographic map shows the east-west Lopez road that continues past the cable fence and dead-ends at a structure. On the 1947 topographic map, this spot is marked by a windmill sign. Northrop states that Lopez did have a windmill; he has a old photograph of the well head, which was destroyed when the sewer line was put in. The windmill appears on the plat maps to be on property owned by someone other than Lopez. He must have had permission to use the land, or leased it.

CONCLUSION

The Lopez Homestead was an important dairy ranch at the turn of the 20th century which has the potential to teach us much about this activity. The layout of the homestead is now being clarified and its history accumulated. Excavation to confirm the oral history and surface scatter is needed.

Interpretative signage is called for. Being situated in a preserve offers the possibility of long-term study and, hopefully, restoration.

The Lopez Homestead, like Diego Alvarado's El Cuervo Adobe and the Pierre Bovet Adobe, both nearby, has been the victim of neglect or indifference and has deteriorated significantly over the past 25 years. Although the adobes were all viewed with a romantic nostalgia for bygone days, not enough was done to protect them. The lesson is that we must take more prompt action if we are to protect what is left from the "ravages of time and destructive forces of progress" (Giffen 1955).

REFERENCES CITED

- Patent Homestead Grants Book #5
n.d. San Diego Historical Museum Archives.
- San Diego Plat Maps
1892 San Diego Historical Museum Archives.
1911 San Diego Historical Museum Archives.
- Brackett, R.W.
1960 *The History of San Diego Ranchos.* Union Title Insurance Co., San Diego, Ca.
- Coons, Bruce
2002 Personal Communication.
- Clews, Bunny
2002 Personal Communication.
- Clews, Christian
2002 Personal Communication.
- Cowan, Robert G.
1956 *Ranchos of California.* Academic Library Guild, Fresno, Ca.
- Davidson, Winifred
1931 Notes: Bonifacio Lopez. On file San Diego Historical Museum Archives.
- Fink, McCorkle, Parkins, and Price
1979 *Lopez Ranch: Penasquitos Park.* Archaeological Site Survey Report. On file South Coastal Information Center: San Diego State University.

- Giffen, Helen S.
1955 *Casas & Courtyards*. Biobooks, Oakland, Ca.
- Giles, Ralph B., Jr.
1993 Is/Is Not Ca-SDI-8120H The Site of Don Bonifacio Lopez's Country Adobe? Unpublished paper on File San Diego Historical Museum Archives.
- Hewitt, Lonnie Burstein & Moore, Barbara Coffin
1989 *Walking San Diego*. The Mountaineers, Seattle, Washington.
- Jacques, Terri and Thesken, Jay
1981 Archaeological Site Survey Record SDI-5161 H(update). On file South Coastal Information Center: San Diego State University.
- Kelly, Mike
2002 Personal Communication.
- McCoy, Lesley C.
1977 Archaeological Site Survey Record (5161H). On file South Coastal Information Center: San Diego State University.
- McCoy, Robert, M.D.
1993 Letter to the Editor. *Canyon News*. October.
- Moore, Barbara
2002 Personal Communication.
- Moyer, Cecil C.
1969 *Historic Ranches of San Diego*. Union Tribune Publishing Co, San Diego, Ca.
- Northrop, John
1992 *Riding 'Round Penasquitos*. Windsor Associates, San Diego, Ca.
1997 *Geology of Los Penasquitos Canyon*. Windsor Associates, San Diego, Ca.
1999 Letter to the Editor. *Canyon News*. September.
2002 Personal Communication.
- Pourade, Richard F.
1963 *The Silver Dons*. Union Tribune Publishing Co., San Diego, Ca.
- Rush, Philip S.
1965 *Some Old Ranchos and Adobes*. Neyenesch Printers, San Diego, Ca.
- San Diego Historical Society
n.d. Lopez File: San Diego Historical Museum Archives.
- Township Survey Maps
1876 On file at City Planning Department, Ruffin Road, San Diego, Ca.
1884 On file City Planning Ruffin Road, San Diego, Ca.