

THE PIERRE BOVET ADOBE

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Materials use defines historic periods in the human journey. Adobe, composed of earth and straw, is definitive of the Spanish, Mexican, and Early American periods in southern California. Though adobe structures are by their very nature subject to decay, they should be protected for as long as possible in order to help preserve the historic record. A significant number of adobe buildings have been left to prematurely decay in San Diego, California. The Pierre Bovet Adobe, built in 1854 in Sorrento Valley by Pierre Bovet, is a prime case in point. The ruins of the adobe, and all of the important historic information it refers to, are currently in jeopardy of disappearing back into the earth from which it was composed. Steps must be taken to draw attention to, protect, care for, and study this important adobe.

Adobes are the oldest buildings in San Diego, California, the site of the first European settlement on the West Coast. They are indicative of the Spanish Colonial, Mexican, and Early American periods. Many have deteriorated or are deteriorating due to neglect – meaning that we are losing some of our earliest and best historic resources.

The Pierre Bovet Adobe, located in Carroll Canyon, which is the far southeastern part of Sorrento Valley (once known as Soledad Valley), is a case in point. This excellent example of a “transitional building,” containing features of the Mexican and Early American periods, is in jeopardy of disappearing, both physically and in terms of our historic consciousness. It is essential that we recognize and offer protection to adobe building sites, such as the Bovet Adobe, to insure that they last as long as possible and remain visible and steadfast in the public record and in people’s memory.

The Bovet Adobe was built in about 1854, when Pierre Bovet (b. 1828), an immigrant from the French part of Switzerland, married Providencia Lopez (b. 1838), the sister of Ramon Lopez, Sr. (b. 1846) and daughter of Bonafacio Lopez (b. 1809). The adobe is described in the historic record as “a famous center of good cheer in the early American period” and as “a famous vineyard and winery of early America days” (Davidson 1931a). Of Bovet himself, it has been said, “Bovet’s skill in cooking and making wine from the grapes growing along side the adobe is still talked about by the older Californios” (Davidson 1931a).

Part of Pierre Bovet’s importance is linked to the family into which he married. Bovet’s father-in-law, Bonafacio Lopez, nicknamed “The King,” was a rotund master horseman weighing nearly 300 lbs. He was one of the sons of Decino Ignacio Maria de Jesus Lopez, a leather-jacket soldier who arrived to serve at the Presidio in the late 1700s (Davidson 1931b; Pourade 1963). The adult Bonafacio Lopez owned an adobe home on the side of Presidio Hill, said to be at the foot of Fort Stockton Street. During his career, he served as *regeator* or *juez de campo* – arbitrator of cattle disputes and master of rodeos – for the Old Town community (1835), substitute head of the Mission of San Diego (1840), and member of the first grand jury (1850).

Lopez also owned a country adobe in Soledad Valley. Around the turn of the century, the father of Grace Diffendorf purchased the old ranch from San Diego Bay tide keeper and meteorologist Andrew Cassidy, who had acquired it in 1864. Diffendorf wrote *The Long Lane* (Vandercook 1959), a book about living in Soledad Valley at the adobe, which she said was located near the confluence of Carroll and Peñasquitos creeks. That would place it near the present-day location of the Sorrento Valley Amtrak Station. Lopez had bought an interest in Sorrento Valley from Cave Coutts, of Rancho Guajome fame, in 1853. Coutts purchased the land from Francisco Alvarado – who originally was given the land as an 1838 Mexican land grant by Governor Carlos Carrillo – on the same day that he sold it to Lopez.

As early as 1841, Lopez was granted permission to have a corral and graze horses and cattle in Soledad Valley because the area was considered to be Pueblo Lands, meant for use by the soldiers and residents of Old Town. Sometime after that date, Lopez built an adobe on this site. Judge Benjamin Hayes (1929) mentions in his diaries that he visited this adobe, and there is on record a photograph of the ruins of it taken by Diffendorf in 1890. Lopez's son-in-law, Phillip Crosthwaite, also visited this adobe. The *San Diego Herald* (1852) mentions that Crosthwaite kept his female pointer dog here and that she gave birth to a litter of puppies.

Needless to say, over the years the ownership of Sorrento Valley has been in dispute. Inevitably, though, Lopez paid taxes on the property to the City, beginning in 1854. Based on his claim to ownership, Lopez gave his other son-in-law, Pierre Bovet, some land located about 2 mi. to the east of his own, and helped Bovet construct his adobe when the latter married Lopez's daughter Providencia in 1854. Prior to settling with his new wife in Carrol Canyon, Bovet had been a chef and baker in Old Town, in partnership with an individual surnamed Lievre. The two paid \$1,200 in taxes on stock-in-trade and two horses in 1852.

The original Bovet Adobe had adobe flooring and three adobe-walled rooms. Sometime after 1913, two back rooms were added, as well as a gabled, shingled roof and wood planking on the outside wall. By 1950, the two back rooms had been dismantled. Eva Bovet, the daughter-in-law of Pierre, said there were a piano and a large table inside the adobe around the turn of the century. San Diego historian Winifred Davidson claimed that there was a wine press inside the adobe during the 1930s. Three Monterey cypresses, which were brought down from northern California by sailing ship, were planted in front of the adobe to offer shade and protection from the wind. Davidson mentions a rose climber and a mulberry tree next to the adobe.

Bovet started out raising sheep. An 1870 tax form shows that he paid \$1 apiece on 125 sheep and \$50 in improvements. The improvements refer to the vineyard he planted. The vineyard is pictured slightly east of the house on an 1884 survey map. However, the remains of a vineyard behind the adobe can be seen in the 1936 photographs taken by Lenora Curtin. Max Dietrich, who started a farm a few hundred yards northwest of Bovet in 1885, said Bovet's sheep were all lost in a hail storm before Dietrich arrived. Eva Bovet, who married Bovet's son "Johnny" (aka Ramon), said in an interview conducted by Wayne Fabert and Al Crosthwaite (1972) that the vineyard was destroyed when a dam above it broke.

Bovet also raised cattle and horses. An article in the February 20, 1872, *San Diego Herald* announced a horse race between Bovet's horse, named "Regulator," and a mare called "Lazy Sal," belonging to Miguel Aquerre, to take place at the Old Town racetrack for a purse of \$100.

Another article in the *San Diego Union* from 1883 claimed that Bovet went to court to establish legal claim to his property. Bovet cited Andrew Cassidy as a witness to his continuous occupation of the property. An 1884 survey map, commissioned by Francisco Alvarado's son Diego, the probable builder of the El Cuervo Adobe in the west end of Peñasquitos Canyon (Lynne Christenson, personal communication 2002), shows the Bovet house and vineyard. An 1892 plat map of the city includes Pierre Bovet's name hand-penciled in a quadrant of the map. In 1895, Bovet was awarded his land under the federal land grant program which gifted many residents of this area with 160 acres, although the U.S. Patent Land Grant Form seems to indicate that Bovet received only 145 acres.

Bovet's daughter-in-law, Eva Bovet, described him as well-educated, fluent in five languages, and possessing excellent penmanship. Somewhere (currently misplaced) in the archives of the San Diego History Center archives, there exists a letter from Bovet, written in French, requesting citizenship, which depicts his penmanship. This letter was formerly housed at the Marston Museum on Presidio Hill, before it was moved to the History Center. Eva Bovet also noted that that he did not want his children to attend school and that he carried one arm around in sling, due to some infirmity (Faber and Crosthwaite 1972).

Bovet was often hired to cater parties for the rich and well-to-do in San Diego. People also came up to his ranch to buy wine or have dinner, arriving by horse, wagon, or railroad. The stage coach, which ran down through Carroll Canyon into Soledad Valley, also stopped at the Bovet Adobe. Albert Smith,

who was the foreman of the Andrew Cassidy ranch in Sorrento Valley, told historian Winifred Davidson (1931a), “Bovet was a famous cook. The rich people would engage him to cook dinner when they gave a party. When I had charge of the Cassidy Ranch in Soledad, I would ride my horse up the canyon for dinner with Bovet.”

Pierre Bovet and his wife, Providencia Lopez (nicknamed “Lencha”), had seven children (McShane and Wydra 1968). Their first child, Jesus, died at the age of one day and was buried in El Campo Santo Cemetery in Old Town in 1856. Their daughter Enriqueta, who died in 1875, is also buried there. These children’s names and date of interment are noted on the kiosk in the cemetery.

Bovet’s daughter Margarita married William Crosthwaite, the son of Philip Crosthwaite, who had fought at the battle of San Pasqual in 1846. The governors of both Upper and Lower California were at their marriage ceremony. After their marriage, Margarita and William went to live at Rancho Santa Rosa in Baja California.

Philip Crosthwaite was married to Bovet’s wife’s sister. Eva Bovet said that Crosthwaite often visited the Bovet Adobe. Judge Benjamin Hayes mentions in his diaries about early San Diego, dated 1849-1875, that Crosthwaite burned lime (calcium carbonate) in this area, selling the final product for \$3 a barrel, which he considered to be “too cheap.” Burning lime involves firing limestone in a lime kiln for up to 60 hours to produce quicklime or calcium oxide, to which water is then added to form slaked lime or calcium hydroxide, which is an important ingredient in plaster, whitewash, and mortar (Sharer 2006). A 1913 watercolor painting of the Bovet Adobe by Eva Scott Feyness shows a small outbuilding to the southwest of the adobe which appears to be the lime kiln used by Crosthwaite. However, according to San Diego historian Steve Van Wormer (personal communication 2012), lime was burnt in anything from a hole in the ground to a large kiln in old San Diego, so test excavations to look for residue of the lime burning at the Bovet adobe site are needed to determine if the outbuilding in the Feyness water color is indeed the Crosthwaite kiln. Eva Bovet also mentioned that Helen Hunt Jackson, the author of the novel *Ramona*, visited the Bovet Adobe.

Bovet’s daughter Juanita married Alonso Alvarado, the son of Diego Alvarado and grandson of Francisco Alvarado, who are associated with the El Cuervo Adobe in Peñasquitos Canyon. Juanita and Alonso Alvarado moved to the Stingaree district in downtown San Diego, where she worked in Lang’s Millinery making dresses for the “ladies of the night.” Bovet’s daughter Elvira married Luis Machado, and they lived in Vista until her death in 1942. Bovet’s son Augustin married Eva Bovet’s mother, lived in Linda Vista, and was involved in the cattle industry. No information is currently available on the elder Bovet’s daughter Dolores. By 1903, Bovet, age 75, moved downtown to a room at 946 Front Street, as shown in the City Directory for that year, perhaps to be closer to his daughter Juanita, who also lived downtown.

Margarita and William Crosthwaite returned from Mexico to live at the Bovet Adobe in 1911. They sold their land in 1927 to Bunny Hunter, who passed it on in the early 1930s to Max Dietrich. It looks like the late 1920s was the last time the Bovet Adobe was inhabited. The wife of wealthy San Diego financier C. Arnold Smith, Helen Smith, who owned thoroughbred racehorses, owned the land after that. From her, it passed to John Lusk, who developed the area, building Lusk Industrial Park. In 1978, Lusk gave to the City the land on the valley floor below his industrial park, on which the Bovet Adobe is situated.

The original adobe, built in 1854, had three rooms. The earliest image, the watercolor painting by Feyness from 1913, depicts it that way. If this is an accurate image, and one has to be careful, because sometimes artists will take license, then two back rooms, a gabled roof, and wooden planking were added after that. This was perhaps done to shore up, refurbish, or enlarge the adobe. These improvements can be seen in the photographs from the 1930s. The materials were probably brought in by train, as the track runs nearby and the train was known to stop to disembark guests of Bovet in times past.

By 1950, the two back rooms and the wood planking had been removed, perhaps for firewood or building material. That this had occurred is shown by an oil painting of the Bovet Adobe from 1950 by



Figure 1. Helen Hill oil painting of the Pierre Bovet Adobe, 1950. Collection of Jerry Hooper.

Helen Hill (Figure 1), who was a student of the renowned *plein air* painter Alfred Mitchell, and by a photograph by Jim Hamilton's father from 1958 (Figure 2).

The Bovet Adobe can be classified as a transitional building, showing the transition from the Mexican to the American period. It shows the influences of the Mexican period because it is made of adobe brick and features rooms that are not connected except by way of the veranda. The American period features are the gabled roof with shingles and the outside wall's wood planking.

Archaeologists such as James Moriarty, Charles Bull, and Leslie McCoy surveyed the site of the Bovet Adobe in 1977-1978 as a prelude to the building of Lusk Industrial Park. Moriarty (1977) said the site was of "moderate to major significance," meaning that it possessed excellent potential to contribute to our understanding of this period in our history. Charles Bull (1978) noted that his team found over 100 Native American artifacts actually embedded in the adobe bricks. Bull suggested further study of the artifact-laden bricks. At the time of the surveys, one corner wall of the adobe was still 12 ft. high. Moriarty (1977) noted that the riparian habitat near the adobe was beautiful and that a nearby stand of gallery oaks located to the southeast was the finest in the county. The archaeologists suggested that determining the relationships between the Bovet Adobe and other nearby habitation sites would be highly productive.

It is significant that the Bovet Adobe has been the subject of *plein air* paintings. *Plein air* painting was originally motivated by a nostalgia for the old California of Spanish and Mexican times. Since the Bovet Adobe was painted at least three times, it means that it was considered to be indicative of those times. In 1913, Eva Scott Feyness made her watercolor painting of the site but mislabeled it as the Ramon



Figure 2. Black & white photograph of Pierre Bovet Adobe, 1958. Collection of Jim Hamilton.

Lopez Adobe. This is probably the source of the erroneous signage that was posted on two metal poles next to the adobe for years. The sign has disappeared, but the two poles remain to this day. Lopez did not own an adobe in the area but rather constructed a wood-framed house and a barn at his small dairy farm in Lopez Canyon in about 1890, which was located over the mesa top to the north (Bowen 2003a).

As noted, Helen Hill painted the site about 1950. Nell Lester, a relative of San Diego archeologist Fred Buchanan, painted it in 1956. Eva Scott Feyness's daughter Lenora Curtin returned to visit the subject of her mother's art work in 1936 and took photographs of the Bovet Adobe from different vantage points. These photographs are instrumental in helping to chronicle the decline of the adobe.

Norwood Brown ran cattle in Carroll Canyon from the 1970s to 1990s (Bowen 2002). He was there in 1977-1978 when the archaeologists surveyed the area. His corral is depicted on one Moriarty's maps, and Moriarty mentions speaking to Brown, who did not like the idea of archaeological digs going on around his cattle and horses. Christen Clews, one of Brown's cowboys, said that they used the adobe as a "line camp" when moving cattle from one pasture to another (Jack Northrop, personal communication 2002). Brown was also the last person to run cattle in Peñasquitos Canyon. His cattle did considerable damage to the Bovet Adobe, as they did to Diego Alvarado's El Cuervo Adobe in Peñasquitos Canyon, which Brown said he regretted.

Today, in 2012, all that remains of the Bovet Adobe is the adobe foundation and a section of adobe wall 2-3 ft. high. There is a chain link fence around the site, but it does not enclose all of the adobe foundation. When Carroll Canyon Road was built, an easement was pushed right up against the back of the adobe. Sprinklers on the side of the easement have pelted the adobe with water, contributing to its

decay. The three Monterey cypresses have died; two are still standing, and one has fallen. There are also two closely-planted pomegranate trees that bear fruit each year on the east side of the adobe foundation, but it is not known how old they are. If their age could be determined, it might indicate that a member of the Bovet family had planted them, although they are not mentioned in any historic documents. Judge Hayes (1929) did mention that Andrew Cassidy, just 2 mi. down the valley to the west, grew them and liked to teach unfamiliar early San Diegans how to eat them. Some of the pepper trees from the Cassidy ranch still grow beside the I-5 freeway. Directly in front of the adobe, there is a large stand of goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.) that comes up every year. This plant likes to grow in disturbed areas, but its leaves, seeds, and flowers are edible, so this too might have been planted by the Bovets, because it is not found in any of the nearby canyons or mesa tops – only here.

For better protection, the Bovet Adobe and surrounding environment need to become part of a park or a preserve. The fence around the adobe should be replaced with a sturdier model that encompasses all of the adobe flooring. The fence should restrict immediate access but allow for public viewing and contemplation. There should be some sort of path of public access, perhaps a nature trail, from the streets to allow for walking and viewing. The shrubs and trees that have sprouted in the adobe should be removed above the roots (Karen Swope, personal communication 2002). Interpretative signage should be erected that explains the people, activities, and history of the adobe and its relationship to surrounding sites, existent and extinct, such as the El Cuervo Adobe, Ramon Lopez Dairy Farm, Bonafacio Lopez Adobe, and Max Dietrich and Andrew Cassidy ranches.

Ideally, the package should include at least a few hundred yards of riparian habitat up the finger canyon to the southeast (which would include the stand of gallery oaks and an old cattle tunnel) and a few hundred yards downstream to the west. Invasive plants should be removed, and native plants restored. Archaeological analysis of the adobe bricks, as well as excavation around the adobe, should be explored.

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