

Sister Rosa Castro – Don Joaquin's Saintly Daughter

By Marion Dale Pokriots

On August 30, 1851, Maria Antonia Jacinta Castro donned the white veil of the Dominican Order at the Santa Catalina Convent in Monterey, California. She was the second Californian to join Sister Mary Goemaere at the newly established school in the former capital of Alta California. Concepcion Arguello had been the first *hija del pais* (native-born daughter) to enter the convent in April of that same year.

Jacinta was thirty-six years old. Born near the Santa Cruz Mission on January 21, 1815 to Jose Joaquin Castro and Maria Antonia Amador de Castro, she was baptized in the parish church on January 31, 1815, by Father Marcelino Marquez.

In 1798, Jacinta's parents had been persuaded to settle at the Villa de Branciforte, a pueblo which was founded in 1797 on the east side of the San Lorenzo River across from the Santa Cruz Mission. Her father had arrived as a boy in Alta California with his parents (Joaquin Ysidro and Martina Botiller de Castro) in the Anza party of 1776. He had served as a soldier in *el Compana del Real Presidio of San Carlos de Monterey* for ten years. Her mother was the daughter of Sargeant Pedro Amador, an explorer with the Portola Expedition, and Ramona Noriega.

Jacinta's childhood years were spent in and round the Santa Cruz Mission. In 1818, when she was three years old, her father was serving as the Mission's *mayordomo*. That year the pirate Bouchard entered the Monterey Bay roadstead and sacked Monterey, causing great anxiety and excitement at both the Santa Cruz Mission and the Villa. During the ensuing years, the pious little Jacinta was known to have assisted the padres at the Mission.

About 1825, Jose Joaquin built an adobe house in the Villa. It was a two-story house and very grand. The timbers had been shipped across the ocean to Santa Cruz. Jacinta's sister, Maria de los Angeles, fondly recalled that the "boards in the floor were danced thin to the music of the guitar, and every night there was music and songs under the window, where the young ivy was learning to grow."

In 1826 and 1827, Jacinta was living in the Villa with her parents and four siblings, Guadalupe, Jose Ygnacio, Joaquin and Maria de los Angeles. By that time, the older children had either died or were married

In 1827, Jacinta's mother, Dona Antonia died and was buried on June 30th, next to the Mission. The younger children continued to live with the widowed Jose Joaquin until he married, around 1831, Maria del Rosario Briones. Jacinta and Maria decided to live with their older sister, Candida, who was married to the Russian, Jose Antonio Bolcoff.

According to the 1836 *padron* (census), Jacinta and Maria de los Angeles were residing with *El Ruso* (Bolcoff) and Candida, along with the Bolcoff's six children, on Don Jose's *San Augustin Rancho*, now Scotts Valley. The Bolcoff adobe was located in the western section of the valley (close to the business center known as "Campo Evers).

On November 11, 1838, shortly after the Bolcoffs had returned from San Rafael, *El Ruso* petitioned Father Lorenzo Quijas, the padre at the San Rafael Mission, for a site for their livestock at either *las Gallinas* or *San Jose* (ranchos in Marin County). Bolcoff mentioned that they were all suffering from another bad case of catarrh (chronic common cold) and for that reason he and his family (Candida, Jacinta and Angelita) were eager to move to San Rafael.

Jose Joaquin Castro died in September 1838 during a smallpox epidemic. With his passing, the daughters and sons of Don Joaquin acquired large numbers of cattle and horses. In 1839, Jose Bolcoff

instituted a petition for the land known by the name of *Refugio*. A letter was sent to Governor Alvarado, stating that Maria Candida, Maria Jacinta and Maria de los Angeles, orphan children of the late Joaquin Castro, and Maria Antonia Amador, owned with hundred head of cattle, and a band of fifty mares, and about fifteen tame horses. They had no place suitable for these animals, therefore they prayed to His Excellency to grant them the place called *el Refugio*, which adjoined the lands of the Citizen Gil Sanchez. Each petitioner signed with her mark.

Governor Alvarado responded on February 13, 1839, asking the Citizen Francisco Soto, Administrator of Santa Cruz, to report upon the petition and to require the petitioners to present a map of the land petitioned for.

Soto wrote that the land petitioned for could be granted, since it was not absolutely necessary to the Mission Establishment, which had another Rancho which was large enough for the Mission's small amount of stock.

In Monterey on June 13, 1840, Governor Alvarado sent a copy of the approval given by the Most Excellent Departmental Junta to the Donas Maria De los Angeles, Maria Candida, and Maria Jacinta in confirmation of the Refugio, which stretched six miles along the northern coast of Santa Cruz.

With this document, Jacinta became owner of one-third of the 12,147-acre *Rancho Refugio*, which stretched six miles along the northern coast of Santa Cruz.

Jacinta, Maria, and the Bolcoffs were not destined to live at San Rafael. In July of 1839, *El Ruso* was serving for the second time as *alcalde* (mayor) of the Villa de Branciforte. The following October he became Administrator of the ex-Mission of Santa Cruz. That same October, Maria de los Angeles married the Tennessee trapper, Joseph Ladd Majors, and they made their home on the *Rancho San Augustin* (Scotts Valley).

In 1840, Jose Bolcoff asked that a certain lot and house near the ex-Mission be granted to Jacinta Castro. On November 12, 1840, Governor Alvarado granted the lot, which was eighty *varas* by eighty *varas* (about 200 x 200 feet), and the house, which was twenty *varas* by six *varas* (about 56 x 17 feet).

The 1840, 1841 and 1843 *padrones* list Jacinta with the Bolcoffs and the Majors. She was twenty-nine years old, and seamstress, and had four young people living with her. Since Jacinta's name was not found in the 1845 *patrona*, it is possible that she was the person listed as *Juana*, but misidentified.

Documents from the 1840's mentioned a *Srn. Jacinta* who did washing and ironing for Pierre Richard, a French trader who married the Bolcoff's oldest daughter, Lucia, in 1844. It is probable that the actual labor was done by one of the young people in Jacinta's household. That Jacinta was a well-to-do woman in her own right is well-documented.

An unfortunate incident occurred in August, 1847, which would bring added responsibilities to Jacinta. Pedro Gomez killed his "beautiful little" wife, the former Barbara Juarez, in a jealous rage. He was apprehended at the Mission, tried by a jury, convicted, and sentenced to be shot and executed.

On August twenty-first, the minor children of Pedro and Barbara Gomez were taken under the jurisdiction of the local court. Balbina Gomez (shown in court records as Baldina, and by some writers as Balinda), between eleven and twelve years old, was placed with Jacinta Castro (shown in court records as Hacinta, and by some writers as Jacinto) to raise until she was twenty-one years old, unless she was sooner married. Jacinta was obligated to give her a good education, three cows and calves at her marriage, or when she became twenty-one. The other daughter, Josefa (shown in court records as Hasapha) was placed with Alexander Rodriguez. His instructions were to provide the same benefits as ordered for Balbina.

While Jacinta carried out her duties as guardian of the teen-age Balbina, Father Jose Sadoc Alemany of Spain was consecrated by the Pope as the new bishop of Monterey. In October, 1850, he,

Father Vilarrasa, and Sister Mary Goemaere of France, sailed from New York to San Francisco. In Santa Barbara, Concepcion Arguello, the heroine of the Count Resanov love story (and the daughter of Jose Dario de Arguello, former Spanish Governor of California), heard Bishop Alemany announce that a convent would be opened in Monterey. Where or when Jacinta learned this exciting news is not known. It is also not known why Jacinta, a woman of considerable wealth and a member of one of the foremost families of Santa Cruz and California, never married. The Castro girls were known for their "dark beauty."

According to oral family tradition, a certain Jacinta Castro had promised to marry a wealthy Spanish merchant. However, on an outing with her father their carriage overturned and the young man broke his leg. He returned to Spain and died there. Jacinta became a Sister at a "mission" in Benicia.

For whatever reasons, on the Feast day of St. Rose of Lima, in August 1851, Jacinta decided to abandon her worldly life and dedicate herself to service in California's first convent, Santa Catalina. She put on the white veil of the novice and took the name, Sister Rosa (*later known as Sister Rose*).

Santa Catalina's classes were first held in the Hartnell house (present site of the Monterey Hospital). As the enrollment increased, Bishop Alemany saw the need for larger quarters and made an offer for a recently constructed hotel belonging to the former Mexican Secretary of State, Manuel Jimeno. The two-story building (146 feet long) was purchased on February 19, 1852. It faced the main street (Calle Principal) and was surrounded by a stone wall. It became the new convent. The census taker, in June, 1852, listed the convent's staff as: Maria Godmarre (Goemaere), 43, native of Belgium, place of last residence: France; Francisca Stafford (Frances Stafford), Ireland, Ohio; Alisa (Aloysia O'Neill, 28, Ohio, Ohio; Rosa Castro, 37, California, California; D. Arguello (Arguello), 51, California, California; *Balbina Gomez*, 16, California, California.

On August 31, 1852, Jacinta made her vows. On that day, she exchanged the white veil of the novice for the black veil of the professed nun.

On September 10, 1852, Sister Rosa had two deeds of conveyance drawn up in Monterey. Both documents began,

Know all men by these presents that I, Jacinta Castro late of Santa Cruz County, State of California, now an inmate of the Convent of Santa Catalina, in the City and County of Monterey, State aforesaid..."

In the first deed, Sister Rosa (*for her love and affection for Balbina Gomez*) gave, sold, and delivered to her brother, Ignacio Castro, fifteen head of Radillo Cattle, to have and to hold said Cattle and the increase thereof for the special benefit of Balbina Gomez, at her disposal when she should attain her majority (age) or marry.

In the second deed, she gave, granted, sold, transferred and conveyed to the principal of Santa Catarina (*sic*) Convent, a lot situated in Santa Cruz, near the ex Mission, formerly occupied by her, with all improvements and appurtenances, and also all the tame cows and Cattle of every description of which she was possessed, which were on the rancho of Don Jose Bolcoff, being one hundred head more or less. The exceptions were the four tame cows she had sold that day to Maria Bolcoff and working cattle that remained on her property on said Rancho, plus the fifteen head of Radillo cattle sold in favor of Balbina Gomez.

Each conveyance was signed, Jacinta Castro, in a bold, strong hand that differed from the penmanship of the rest of the document. The witnesses to her signature were Messrs. MacDougall [Frederick Alexander McDougall] Echiverria, and [David] Spence.

On October 4, 1852, Jacinta deeded to Candida, wife of Jose Bolcoff, of Santa Cruz County, *in consideration of the love and affection she bore to her sister all her right and title, interest in and to the undivided one-third of the Refugio Rancho.*

After the Sisters were established in their new building, Lieutenant Alfred Sully, a son-in-law of Dona Jimeno, wrote to his parents that by peering through the holes of the fence he could catch a glimpse of the nuns in their white robes at the Santa Catalina Convent. One of the nuns was a young Mexican girl who resembled his recently deceased wife, Manuela. He also related that the girl's father, in a fit of jealousy, killed her mother. He stated that, the Americans, as it was the time of the war, seized him and shot him without judge or jury. The girl was under the protection of a California woman who had taken the veil and had taken the girl into the convent. The young lady's nickname, he wrote, was *Vinnie*. A coincidence, or were there two such cases?

In November, 1852, Bishop Alemany reported that there were sixty pupils in the Monterey school under the Dominican sisters. Some of the first pupils to attend Santa Catalina were Engracia and Dolores Munras, Mariana Malarin, Luisa Moreno, Soledad Romie, Dolores Sanchez (from next door), Amelia Cooper, Ann Hartnell, and Marianna Gomez.

In 1853, Bishop Alemany sold the convent building, which he had purchased for \$5,000. To Sister M. Goemaere, Sister Luise O'Neill and Sister Rosa Castro for a token payment of *five dollars*. The same year, the Bishop was notified by the Holy See that he had been elected to be the Archbishop of San Francisco.

Benicia was the State capital, so it was decided to move the Dominican schools to the area. On March 4, 1854, Father Vilarrasa moved his boy's school to Benicia and Sister Goemaere made arrangements to buy lots with frame houses on them for the girl's school.

Before leaving Monterey, on March 21, 1854, Sister Rosa Castro made her last will and testament. She gave and devised unto Sister Agnes Rementería, also of the Order of St. Dominic and resident of Monterey, all her rights, title and interest in the house that was occupied by the Sisters of St. Dominic in said town of Monterey. She also gave to Sister Rementería her rights, title and interest to the garden and yard in back of the house. Sister Agnes was to be her executrix, but in case Sister Rosa outlived Sister Agnes, Sister Mary Goemaere was to be her heir and executrix. It was signed in the same bold signature of her previous documents.

The schooner *Eda* sailed from Monterey on August 16, 1854, with seven professed nuns Mother Mary Goemaere, Sister M. Frances Stafford, Sister M. Aloysia O'Neill, Sister M. Dominica Arguello, Sister M. Rosa Castro, Sister M. Catalina Ocaranza, and Sister M. Agnes Rementería. There were three novices: Sister M. Margarita Gomes, Sister M. Imelda Gallagher, and Sister M. Hyacinth Luna. The sisters, and some resident pupils, disembarked at Benicia on August 24, and soon settled at their new school, renamed St. Catherine's Academy.

General Vallejo's daughters, Maria and Luisa, were soon enrolled at the academy and obeying the strict rules of the school. The pupils were to rise at five-o'clock in the summer and six-o'clock in the winter. Silence was to be observed from night prayers until breakfast. The pupils were to be polite and gentle towards each other. Mischief making, impertinence and disrespect to teachers would be followed by severe punishment. Wearing the school uniform was only mandatory on Sunday and festival days. On weekdays they could wear whatever they chose.

The staff of St. Catherine's taught a great variety of subjects, including astronomy, bookkeeping, chemistry and needlework of every description. They explained to the parents that *particular care is directed toward the promotion of refinement of manners and the constant maintenance of a polite and amiable deportment.*

After moving to Benicia, Jacinta continued to sell land in Santa Cruz for several years. In 1855, Jacinta sold a part of *Rancho Refugio* to Moses A. Meader (or Meder) of Santa Cruz for \$2,000. On February 28, 1859, *Dona Maria Jacinta Castro* sold to her nephew, Amadeo Bolcoff, a tract of land on the *Refugio* for one-hundred dollars. The latter transaction, (signed with her "X") was witnessed by S.W. Hayden and Mother Mary Goemaere of the County of Solano. On March 1, 1859, *Dona Maria Jacinta Castro*, daughter of Jose Joaquin Castro, deceased and resident of the City of Benicia, sold to her brother, Guadalupe Castro, of Santa Cruz, *a certain piece or parcel of land lying and being in the County of Santa Cruz, known as San Andres Ranch*, one-thirteenth part of said ranch, for \$100. This deed was also witnessed by C.W. Hayden and Mother Goemaere, and it was signed with an "X" (Jacinta's father had been granted the 8,912-acre San Andres Rancho in 1833.)

On account of improper drainage around their Benicia buildings, Mother Goemaere decided to look for a better location. By 1859, the cornerstone for a three-story brick building was laid on the grounds of present day Solano Square shopping center. The 1860 Census for Solano County shows St. Catherine's Female Academy at Benicia having real estate valued at \$80,000, and personal estate valued at \$2,000. There were nine teaching nuns, thirteen sisters, Mother Mary Goemaere, and seven male servants. Sister Rosa Castro, 47, and *Sr Magt. Gomez*, 24, were listed as sisters. In an October 18, 1885, article in the *Santa Cruz Daily Sentinel*, Edward L. Williams, who was acquainted with Balbina Gomez, confirmed that she was a nun in the Benicia convent.

On November 1, 1861, the Dominican Sisters were visited by the geologist, William H. Brewer. He noted in his journal that there were two large female academies in Benicia. The Roman Catholic, in charge of the Order of St. Catherine, has just erected new building costing thirty to thirty-five thousand dollars. Brewer's host, Judge S.C. Hasting, took him to the school and introduced him to Mother Superior Goemaere, after which they were allowed to visit several of the rooms.

Brewer wrote that the thirty-five sisters were dressed in *the most untasteful white garb s of their order*, but they were "kind and the pupils were greatly attached to them." There were about one-hundred girls (besides the day scholars), with whom he was able to meet coming from the chapel.

From 1863 through 1876, Sister Rosa was member of the General Council of the sisters. The 1870 Census listed the twenty-five inmates of the academy in Benicia. Rosa Castro's name is written just below that of Mary Goemaere. The name of *Sister Margaret (Balbina)* does not appear in the Census. Balbina had died on May 1, 1869.

On June 22, 1878, Sister Rosa Castro passed away at the convent at the age of sixty-three. She is buried, near *La Beata* Concepcion Arguello, on a wind-swept hill, overlooking Suisun Bay, in St. Dominic's Cemetery. Sister Rosa was noted for her great sanctity and love of flowers. It was said that she carried plants from the convent garden in Monterey to Benicia.

Don Joaquin's pious little girl, who had assisted the Santa Cruz Mission fathers in her youth, helped fund one of the State's foremost educational institutions.

St. Catherine's Academy continued to operate for eighty-eight after Sister Rosa Castro's death. Its doors were permanently closed in 1966.

Biographical Essay

To the reader:

Much of the information for this article was obtained from the archives of the Dominican Convent of San Rafael, courtesy of Sister M. Martin Barry; LeNoir Miller's *A Dominican Heritage 1850-1979* (Benicia, CA.: Dominican Fathers, 1979); Amelie Elkinton's "Saint Catherine's Convent of Monterey" (*Noticias del Puerto de Monterey* Vol. XXV & XXVI); the file of Maude Wyman Birkett; William

Brewer's *Up and Down California in 1860-1864* Berkeley CA.: University of California Press, 1966); Richard Dillon's *Great Expectations, The Story of Benicia* (Benicia, CA.: Benicia Heritage Press, 1980); Leon Rowland's *Santa Cruz, The Early Years* (Santa Cruz, CA.; Paper Vision Press, 1980)

Primary sources I consulted included the Monterey County Census, 1852; Solano County Censuses, 1860 and 1879; Santa Cruz County Official Records – 1:77, 1:219, 1:507-9, 1:435, 3:163, 4:410, 4:543; Santa Cruz Mission Records – Matrimonios and Difuntos; Padrones for the years 1826-1828, 1836, 1840, 1841, and 1843, located in the files of Leon Rowland at UCSC University Library, Special Collections; the 1845 Branciforte Padron was from Los Californios' *Antepasados* Vol. IV, 1980-1981.

Newspaper articles were from *Alta California*, March 19, 1866; *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 16, 1896; *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 8, 1932; *Santa Cruz Daily Sentinel*, October 18, 1885.

Information concerning the *Refugio Rancho* came from Los Californios translation of Expediente No. 131, Spanish Archives, 1980.

Pre-Statehood Documents, translated by Starr Gurcke, at UCSC University Library, Special Collections, were from the *Vallejo Papers*, V. 232, Bancroft Library; and *Monterey Archives* Vol. 13, pp. 1047, 1063.