

# The Tales of Old Mother Chapar

As narrated by *Phil Reader*

She was already old, so it is said, when the city of Santa Cruz was new; a living relic from an era, which had long since passed into the chain of time. Each morning she could be found, with staff in hand, making the rounds of the back streets and the alley ways of town; reeking of cheap whiskey, foul smelling cigars, and begging for enough food to keep her scarecrow frame alive long enough to beg another day.

Most citizens and local merchants felt compassion for her wretched condition and extended many charities to the old woman, as she paused at their door steps, filling her drawstring gunny sack with tiny tidbits of meat, vegetables, and the occasional coin. In return, they would receive a toothless grin and a heat felt, "*Buenos dias!*"

But the refined ladies of nineteenth century Santa Cruz turned away in embarrassment, as they chanced to encounter her along the avenue – their delicate figures and attire in stark contrast to her rough and wrinkled countenance. Sometimes street urchins would follow along behind, pelting her with small pebbles, while taunting her with insulting rhymes. She would respond in kind, shaking an angry fist in their direction and muttering profanities at them in Spanish until, at last some objecting adult would step in and chase the children away.

At the end of her daily round, she would retreat back up to her little hack on the chalk rock hill <sup>(1)</sup> and pass the day in sun-drenched siesta, sometimes receiving a visit from an old friend or one of her many descendants, but usually she would sit quietly alone until night descended.

She was called "Old Mother Chapar,"<sup>(2)</sup> a name, the meaning and origin of which had been lost to the years, but a name which she graciously accepted. Chapar was born, Maria Josefa Incarnacion Perez y *Rodriguez*, at The Pueblo de Branciforte <sup>(3)</sup> in the year 1806, to pioneers Jose Maria Perez and Margarita Rodriguez. Her father, a native of Tepic, Jalisco Province, New Spain, was a soldier, recently retired from the Spanish army, when he settled at the pueblo just a few short years after its founding. IN 1805, Perez married Margarita Rodriguez, the daughter of another retired soldier, and this union produced nine children of whom Maria Josefa was the eldest.

She attained womanhood fair of figure and possessing a remarkable beauty which was widely praised. She was commonly known as *la mas bonita de Santa Cruz*, the prettiest maid in Santa Cruz, and her comeliness attracted many suitors. But she chose her lovers poorly, taking as her husband, Gervasio Soto, a freebooter and petty criminal.

Their marriage would prove to be disastrous, as Soto preferred to spend his time drinking a gambling rather than working to support his wife and family. Early in their relationship, Maria Josefa joined him in his freewheeling lifestyle, quickly becoming addicted to strong drink, a vice which was to become the bane of her existence. When drunk, she became quarrelsome and vindictive, not only to her husband, but also to her neighbors. During the 1830's, the behavior of the Sotos was the scandal of Branciforte and led to countless incidents of friction and strife at the pueblo.

Time and time again, the couple were placed in stocks at the plaza on Mission Hill and subjected to public humiliation, but the fighting and petty thievery continued until 1842, when they were banished from "Branciforte "in the interests of public tranquility."

For the next decade the Sotos and their children, who numbered seven, four sons and three daughters, knocked about central California, dividing their time between San Francisco, San Jose, and finally Monterey, where Gervasio died in 1850.

The loss of her husband, who had proven to be such a negative influence, stabilized Maria Josefa's life to a large degree and she settled peacefully into widowhood and the advance of old age. But the wild years had taken their toll, as had the ravages of alcoholism. Her beauty had long faded, only to be replaced by a lean and wrinkled appearance – timeworn, leathery, and topped by a crown of coarse, graying hair. She walked with a stoop and her mind was prone to wander away, leaving a dull detached look to her features. An unkempt colorless costume clung loosely to her gaunt form leaving little trace of her once fabled beauty.

During the early 1860's, she returned to Santa Cruz to be near her daughters, who lived with their husbands at the old pueblo. She moved into a small wood-framed shanty on the northeast corner of Water Street and

Branciforte Avenue and, at this time, began to make her rounds begging for food and tobacco.

During the next thirty years, she gained acceptance as “Old Mother Chapar” among several generations of Santa Cruzans for her genuine eccentricities and colorful bearing. She also became a favorite of newspaper reporters in search of human interest and history stories to fill the wanting pages of the area press on many an otherwise dull and boring day.

As a storyteller and antiquarian, Chapar is the source of much of the local history and folklore which appeared in print during and after her lifetime. Her tales and anecdotes of the early years dealt mainly with memorable events among the Indians and native Californios (Spanish), set during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most tales have some basis in fact, but many particulars have been corrupted, suffering greatly from the weaknesses of the “oral history” tradition, the manipulations of faulty memory, and most importantly, the lack of written documentation.

Following are seven well known stories, as related by Old Mother Chapar to various reporters and which were taken from the files of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, the *Santa Cruz Surf*, the *Watsonville Pajaronian*, and the *San Francisco Examiner*, on dates ranging from 1869 to 1896. *Some sections of these tales have been edited to preserve the flow of the story line, and extraneous information has been removed for the sake of brevity.*

#### ***The Lost Church Treasury (4)***

In the rear of the ruins of the Old Catholic church is a large pear orchard which every year yields an ample harvest of fruit. Many years ago, this orchard was the scene of a great battle between the Spaniards and Indians.<sup>(5)</sup> Even now, a person can walk thorough it and find human bones and skulls, which would at first be taken for the bones and skulls of animals, but on closer examination, the finder will see that they are really human.

The old resident of the City of the Holy Cross (*Santa Cruz*) can tell many interesting event which transpired during the infancy of the old mission. One learns that about the year of 1846, two half breed Indians robbed the church treasury of \$30,000.00, and for a time eluded all efforts

made for their capture; and when at last they were caught, nothing could be found of the missing money.

They were released and watched, it being supposed that they had buried the treasure somewhere near the mission and would at a proper time take possession of it. The Indians were too smart, however, to be thus easily caught; and for over a year made no attempt to regain the money.

Finally, they were detected making a raid, and in the ensuing battle, one was killed outright and the other mortally wounded while endeavoring to steal some horses. When the latter found that he was about to die, he confessed that he and his comrade were the robbers and that the money was still buried on the ranch of Joseph Majors. (6) Although many have tried in vain to find it, the treasure was never found, and if it was buried on the ranch mentioned, it is there to this day and likely to remain there until some lucky *hombre* comes across it.

### **The Legend of The Branciforte (7)**

The Indian, Justiano Roxas, in his early manhood, was quite a warrior. Long before the *padres* settled here, so the legend runs, there was a great battle fought on the brow of the terraced hill just east of the old mission church building and north and west of the *padres*' orchard. In the conflict, the whole tribe, afterwards known as the Brancifortes, was killed by another tribe, called the Yachicumne. The latter settled in the Tulare Valley, at French Camp, near Stockton.

The Yachicumne warriors were of large size, greater strength and used longer bows with poison arrows, while the Brancifortes and Aptos, who living mostly on fish and shell-fish afforded by the sea, were not athletic or accustomed to the chase.

At this early day, a tribe of great wealth lived near San Jose and the Santa Clara Mission. They gained their wealth by exchanging red paint refined from cinnabar or vermilion, which was procured at the New Almaden quicksilver mines, for furs, skins, and dried meat from the Tulare and Yachicumne tribes in the east, as well as dried fish and shells from the Aptos and Brancifortes to the west. This war paint, or vermilion, was worth

more than any other article except the brilliant abalone or sea-shell ornaments and other articles used by the Indians in their trading excursions.

Ornaments for the ears and nose, and worn as wampum around the neck, were common among the Indians, and were considered of more value than silver and gold. They were eagerly sought after by all the tribes inland and adjacent to the coast; hence the war of extermination commenced by the Yachicumne, first against the tribes of San Jose for the cinnabar mines.

After the disastrous battle, near where the old Mission Santa Cruz now stands, Justiniano, with two others, the only survivors, joined the Aptos tribe and lived at their village, until called back to Santa Cruz, on the establishment of the Mission. Of the battle, there is no doubt, but the story is conjecture and; is given for what it is worth.

### **The Petrified Knife (8)**

“Come on down to my saloon and I’ll show you some curios,” said Jim Stevens to a reporter for the Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, one day in the spring of 1884. The scribe took “Honest James” up on his invitation and was soon standing at the bar draining a glass of “cough medicine” with the proprietor. From under a counter, Jim withdrew a folded length of muslin and opened it, revealing a rather rusty looking piece of metal.

“That’s a petrified knife,” he said, reacting to the look of inquiry on the reporter’s face. “Mother Chapar, one of my warmest admirers, gave it to me the other day. The old girl, you see, is ‘bout a hundred and thirty-three years old now. And she feels that she hasn’t got long to live, so she gave this as a keepsake. Chapar was a noted belle in this town, when she was young. She and Buenos Noches, who used to go in swimming at the headwaters of Soquel Creek with Balboa, the fellow, who first saw Monterey Bay, long before its silver surface was ...”

Here Jim lost his train of thought, when he stopped to pour out another round of drinks. This chore completed, he resumed his history of the relic.

As I was sayin’, Old Noches got mashed on Chapar, and being too far away from his native land to give her a real present, as there were no jewelry

stores here then, he gave her this knife. He had carried it through man wars, and said his grandfather bought it in 1648. Chapar said, when he gave it to her, the tears dropped from his eyes so thick that, as you see for yourself, salt formed on the handle and blade. This is the oldest relic in town and Chapar told me to cherish it tenderly and I goin' to do it, too you bet."

From the inner recesses of a cigar box, Jim produced a brass spoon and a toothpick which he remarked were found at the Potrero <sup>(9)</sup> and once ornamented the watch chain of Adios Amigo, a sheepherder, who roamed about Loma Prieta when many of the Revolutionary patriots' grandfathers were boys.

But, that's a story for another day.

### **Father Sanchez** <sup>(10)</sup>

In 1884, Helen Hunt Jackson, a transplanted New England author, published a novel which bore the title, Ramona, and portrayed the plight of the native Indians, who were left homeless and defenseless, following the decline of the Mission chain and the American conquest of Alto California. One of the more fascinating characters in the book was the once famous Franciscan monk, Father Salvierderra, stout defender of the Mission way of life.

Through Mother Chapar, Zacha Barnet, a young reporter of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, learned that this beloved padre had once been a familiar figure along the banks of the San Lorenzo. Barnet visited her at her Branciforte home on a warm spring day in 1885 and asked if she was familiar with the book, Ramona.

Chapar explained that after a granddaughter finished reading the novel to her, she had correctly guessed that fictional "Father Salvierderra" was actually based on the life of Padre Francisco Sanchez, whom she had known during the early days. He was, she said, a pious man, who walked barefoot up and down California on his many errands of mercy. Barefoot, because much to the chagrin of his superiors, he would always give his sandals to any wayfarer, who was in need of them. In vain, again and again, his brother monks supplied him with a warm cloak which he quickly gave away to the first beggar he met. The friars at the monastery in Santa Barbara had to carefully lock away their food supplies or else Padre Sanchez would

surely give them away. He was a Franciscan, cut from the same ilk as St. Francis of Assisi, the holy man, who had lent his name to the gray order.

When he visited Santa Cruz, he always wept over the crumbling ruins of the old Mission, and regardless of the weather, passed the nights within its hallowed walls. Mother Chapar recalled the considerable time which Father Sanchez had spent at the Pajaro Valley Orphan Asylum, even begging alms on the streets of Watsonville for the benefit of “his dear sainted little children.”

He had died, she went on to relate, of a broken heart, wearily brooding over sad memories and still sadder anticipations, over the downfall of the missions, the loss of the great estates, and the growing power of the ungodly in the land.

With this, the old woman murmured, *vaya con dios, mi amigo*, as she slowly drifted off to sleeping in the warm spring sun. The reporter carefully closed his notebook, put away his pencil, and stepped silently off of the porch, moving back down the hill towards town.

### **The Skeleton in George Pringle’s Garden**

On February 4, 1891, George Pringle, who owned a small home *on Riverside Avenue, along the banks of the San Lorenzo River*, was digging in his garden, when his spade unearthed the entire skeleton of a human being. The ghastly find shocked Mr. Pringle, who called in the Coroner to dispose of the bones. They were taken to the office of a local physician for examination; and after much scrutiny, were declared to be those of a European or Caucasian, and not that of an Indian, as was suspected.

The regional press including the San Francisco *Examiner*, were quick to pick up on the story, publishing a number of reminiscences by pioneers, dealing with missing persons and secret burials. Two of these were by forty niners, recounting stories told them by “an old Spanish woman,” later identified as Old Mother Chapar.

### **The Indian and The Spaniard**

Through an interpreter, the old woman told how, when she was a young bride, she remembered witnessing a bull-fight, which was impressed upon her memory by a strange set of circumstances in connection with it. Two men, an Indian and an old Spaniard, were betting and quarreling, when the Spaniard raised his whip and struck the Indian across the face. The Indian flew at his opponent's throat and would have throttled him, if it were not for the interference of his friends.

He men forgot their quarrel in the interest of the fight and there was apparently peace between them. Two weeks later, the Spaniard disappeared, having mentioned before, that he would be going soon to Yerba Buena (San Francisco), and then back to Spain on the next ship. He was old, cross, and disliked by almost everyone. Being without relatives in the country, no inquiries were made regarding his disappearance.

Years later, a brother came out from Spain, in search of this man, but could find no trace of his whereabouts. Afterwards, it was supposed that foul play had been used by the Indian, who had wandered away and nothing definite could be ascertained as to his whereabouts. Also, many old timers believe that skeleton in Pringle's garden was none other than the long lost Spaniard.

So ran the story of the aged woman, but the positive clearing up of the mystery remains to be unraveled in the other world.

### **The Captain and The Senorita**

In the summer of 1833, a ship dropped anchor in the bay. From it stepped a handsome young Spaniard, with eyes of liquid black and the figure of an Apollo. He had sailed in his own ship from Spain for the west coast on a hunting trip. As he stepped from his boat onto the beach, he was hospitably received by the native. Among the, was a pretty senorita, whose eyes met those of the young Don's, and the mysterious telepathy, which can only be interpreted by lovers, passed between them; and the message told that each had met an ideal consort. So the young Captain sought her acquaintance.



He did not have much trouble in being introduced to her. The return trip to Spain was postponed from day to day, as the Captain was loathe to part from her, who was the mistress of his thoughts. The crew came on shore often to mingle with the natives. /while listening to the sweet words of the Captain, the senorita, n her ecstasy of bliss, forgot her intended husband, the son of a land owner. The day for the nuptials had bee set, and a score of cattle had been prepared for a barbeque, which was to be included in the festivities. The wedding was postponed, so often that the intended husband a fiery youth, became aroused with jealousy and sought revenge.

It was the habit of the Captain to sail in his boat up the San Lorenzo River, tie the boat to a willow tree, then go to the home f the senorita and serenade her, poring out his soul in melody. She would respond by coming out of the house, and the two would go out for a stroll. He pictured to her in glowing language the beauties of his castle in Barcelona, his vast possessions and his noble family in his endeavor to have her fly away with him to Spain.

One evening, the jealous lover lay in wait for the Captain, who had impressed a good night kiss on his *inamorata*, before his return to the ship. The Captain let it be understood that he was an expert swordsman, a daring rider and a crack shot. This the jealous man knew, hence he would not meet him openly. As the Captain was on his way, a shot from behind brought him to the ground and he breathed his last. Calling his companions to him, the murderer ordered the body to be hidden.

When the disappearance of the Captain was learned, the crew made a vigorous search for him, but did not meet the success. So one day in the spring, they sailed away for Spain without their Captain. The body was never found. The senorita, broken hearted, soon afterwards entered a convent/ It was not until many years afterward, in Mexico, that murderer, on his death bed, told the story of his crime; but passed to the great beyond, before he could describe the locality where the body was buried.

The pioneer, who first heard this story from Mother Chapar, thinks that perhaps the skeleton found was that of the gallant Captain, as the occurrence related, happened in that vicinity.

## **The Legend of The San Lorenzo (12)**

When Mother Chapar was young, she had befriended many of the Indians on the *rancherías* in the area, including those living in the *el Potrero*. In this manner, she became familiar with the legends of the Indian race that were passed down from father to son.

One day she chanced to meet a reporter for the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* on the streets of town, and he asked her to recount for him the story, which she had heard from the Potrero Indians, of the evil spirit that dwelled on the San Lorenzo. She nodded her consent, leaned over upon her staff and began.

**When the white people began to settle in Santa Cruz, the Indians did not receive them kindly. The Indians did not want to be disturbed. They desired to remain free from the trappings of civilization. The first white visitor to put foot in Santa Cruz was a sailor, who had been shipwrecked. The Indians did not receive him kindly. One night, at the council of the leaders of the tribe, it was decided to put him to death, because the daughter of the chief had smiled kindly on him. A young Indian determined to save the white man, so he warned him in time to escape. For this, the Indian was condemned to die, after it was found out that he had assisted the white man in escaping.**

**Despite the Indian's appeals, no mercy was shown the doomed man. With his dying breath, he cursed the tribe, saying he would forever haunt them. After his death, bad luck came to the tribe. Nothing they undertook was successful. In time, the evil spirit of the San Lorenzo became the terror of the Indians, and they have so rapidly disappeared that at present there are few left.**

In the years since that time, there has been much tragedy in the Potrero. Many violent deaths have occurred in the region. The great battle with the savage Yachicumnes took place at the bottom of Mission Hill. In 1877, two *bandidos* murdered a man on the banks of the San Lorenzo, just so they could get the money to go see the circus. Later, the two were lynched from the struts on the upper bridge. Near Juan Santiago's cabin, an Indian was found with his throat cut. Many workmen have been killed or horribly maimed in accidents at the Powder Works. In the area, a colored girl died, after being thrown from a wagon, and a small child was suffocated in a vault. At night, travelers fear to pass down the river road frightened of being robbed or murdered; and, a number of houses and barns have mysteriously burned to the ground.

“Do I think,” said the old woman, “that the evil spirit of the San Lorenzo still exists? I don't know. I leave that for the white man, who studies and supernatural to explain.”

Then the old woman lighted a cigarette and refused to tell another legend.



Old Mother Chapar endured, well into the eighth decade of her existence, living as she wised – free and independent from the dictates of others and content to subsist by her cunning, even in extreme old age. Tub time and intemperance managed to wear down her indomitable constitution, and toward the end, she fell into dire poverty. In 1889, she “went over the hill to the poor house,” and spent several months at the county hospital, as a guest of the county. When released, she moved into the residence of her daughter and son-in-law, Felipe and Carmelita Leggett, where she died in her sleep, on May 17, 1890. The following afternoon, she was buried at the old Holy Cross Cemetery on Lower Soquel (now Capitola) Road.

### **End Notes**

- (1) The “chalk rock hill,” sometimes the “Branciforte Hill,” was a 19<sup>th</sup> century term for describing what is now called “Water Street Hill,” the steep section of Water Street between Reed Way and Branciforte Avenue. Chalk rock is a misnomer in that the exposed geological strata is composed of diatomite.
- (2) Mother Chapar was sometimes called simply “Chepa,” another name with no discernible meaning, although some historians have interpreted it to mean “the hunched one,” while others claim that it is a corruption of “Josefa.”
- (3) The pueblo de Branciforte was a village which had been established on the hill overlooking the east bank of the San Lorenzo River. It was created by the authorities of New Spain as a civilian and military outpost to protect the coast of Alta California against invasion from the sea. Founded in 1796, it was named for the Marquis de Branciforte, then the viceroy of New Spain. The pueblo enjoyed a life of almost half a century before its destruction at the hands of land-hungry Americans.

(4) The Watsonville *Pajoronian*, January 21, 1869.

(5) The exact date of this battle is unknown, but the fact that such a campaign did occur on, or just below Mission Hill, is established to a certainty, by a number of 19th century references, which can be found in both Santa Cruz and San Joaquin Valley source material. All authorities, except the 1869 *Pajoronian* article, however, refer to it as a battle between two Indian tribes.

(6) Tennessee born, Joseph L. Majors, received a section of Rancho San Agustin, the old Mexican land grant, through his marriage to Maria de los Angeles Castro. He became a naturalized Mexican citizen. The “Majors Ranch” mentioned here, of some 60 acres, was located in the west side of Santa Cruz atop Escalone Heights.

(7) The Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, December 27, 1873, The Legend of Branciforte is told As a part of the obituary of Justiniano Roxas, an Indian erroneously said to be 123 years of age at the time of his death.

The article refers again to the battle of the Orchard, just below Mission Hill, only this time, specific tribes are named. It says that the invading Indians were of the Yachicumne triblet of the Yokuts, a warlike tribe from the central San Joaquin Valley, while the defenders were members of the local Ohlone tribe, called the Aptos triblet, a tribe afterwards known as Brancifortes.”

The “Brancifortes” is, of course, a misnomer, in that the term was unknown to the Indians until 1896, when the Spanish named their newly established after the Marques de Branciforte. The author of the Roxas obituary, not knowing the name of the local Indian tribe, which had been so soundly defeated at the orchard battle, merely affixed to them an ancient designation.

(8) The Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, May 30, 1884.

(9) Potrero – A Spanish term meaning pasture or cattle ground. During the mission period, the padres grazed most of their herds on an area of land lying to the north and west of Mission Hill. Using current

points of reference, “the Potrero” was between the San Lorenzo River, Harvey West Park, Pogonip lodge, and the Paradise Park Masonic Club. During the Mexican and American periods, it was a *rancheria*, or reservation for most of the remaining Ohlone Indians.

(10)The Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, February 18, 1885, Jackson, Helen Hunt, Ramona, Signet Classic, 1988, New York; Bancroft, H. H. Indian Collection, Misc., Bancroft Library, U. C. B.

(11)The Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, February 5, 1891, February 7, 1891, The Santa Cruz *Surf*, February 4, 1891, The San Francisco *Examiner*, February 4, 1891, February 6, 1891.

(12)The Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, January 8. 1886.

(13)Between 1884-1886, Zacha Barnet, a young reporter for the Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, conducted a series of personal interviews with some of the more colorful characters, who resided in the area. These chronicles add much to the local tradition and lore; and, some future researcher would be greatly rewarded by carrying out a detailed study of these most interesting articles.

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