

California's Knight on a Golden Horse

**Dwight Murphy,
Santa Barbara's Renaissance Man**

Edward A. Hartfeld

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THE DWIGHT MURPHY MEMORIAL PROJECT
SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA • 2007

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Chapter I

A Little Town Down the Coast

"In no other place did we meet natives so affectionate and good natured."

—Portolá expedition diarist, 1769

A Land of Carefree and Civilized Dwellers

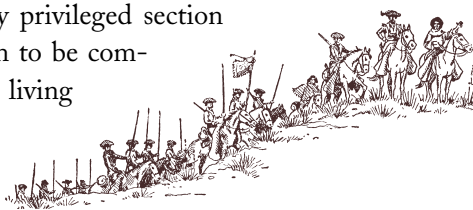
As if part of some grand providential design for the protection of a favored place against unpleasant weather, part of the Southern California coast faces south and thus moderates Pacific storms bearing down from the north. The grand design includes four islands off-shore to calm the occasionally tempestuous Pacific and thereby further safeguard this already privileged section of coastline. Of course, for the design to be complete there had to be some protected living

space for humans, so nature created a fertile coastal shelf backed by moun-

tains that likewise run east to west and shield it from the elements. The mountains were no doubt also included to capture Pacific rains for the necessary water supply and to mitigate the hot, dust-bearing Santa Ana winds that periodically overcome the cool prevailing onshore breezes. Furthermore, to add special character to this extraordinarily grand design, the mountain range's most dramatic peaks were placed immediately be-

hind the coastal shelf's broadest, most likely place for human habitation, and for color they glow with a lavender hue at sunset. In 1602 A.D., this place was named Santa Barbara by its earliest European admirers, the Spanish.

This Eden-like refuge seems to attract unusually civilized and carefree peoples. In 1542, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo must have thought his ships were under attack when he entered the Santa Barbara Channel and saw long canoes full of Chumash Indians approaching. Instead, the Chumash welcomed the Spaniards with friendship and



gifts, but they couldn't persuade Cabrillo and his men to come ashore and accept more of their hospitality.

The sociable Chumash did not have another opportunity to demonstrate their aboriginal civility to the outside world until 1769, when the first land expedition of the Spanish Crown wandered up the coast from San Diego on its way to Monterey Bay. According to the expedition's diarist it encountered thousands of Indians in dozens of villages on the Alta California coast, but "in no other place did we meet natives so affectionate and good natured" as those at today's Santa Barbara. Unlike any other people they encountered, the women danced, and the explorers named the Indian village La Ranchería del Baile de las Indias (the Village of the Dance of the Indian Women). One expedition member said the Chumash there "were very fond of *fiestas*, and would spend days and nights, almost without interruption, in singing and dancing and making speeches commemorating deeds of their ancestors...until all the food...gathered for the occasion was exhausted." In fact, the Chumash made so much noise in their efforts to entertain their visitors that the Spaniards soon moved on to gain peace and quiet. Possibly behind the merry exuberance was a fondness for an intoxicating concoction prepared from burnt shells, wild tobacco, and wild cherries called *pipibata*.¹

Sergeant José Francisco Ortega, who commanded the 1769 expedition's military detachment, claimed that the Indians of the channel were superior to those found in any other part of the new Spanish province. Of course, being the prod-

uct of a culture that honors the most genteel forms of hospitality and great parties known as *fiestas*, which welcome everyone without invitation, Ortega could easily appreciate this custom so far removed from his homeland. Instead of reacting with fear or anger when forty Spaniards in the company of Father Junípero Serra raised the flag of Spain and a cross for the dedication of the Royal Presidio in 1782, it is reported that Chief Yanonali attended the ceremony with members of his friendly tribe and exchanged gifts with the Spanish. The English navigator and explorer George Vancouver also admired the Chumash. After lingering in



Presidios and missions were founded with simple religious ceremonies. By Carl Oscar Borg.



Santa Barbara's Royal Presidio, by Russel A. Ruiz. Courtesy Santa Barbara Historical Society.

Santa Barbara for a week in 1792, he described the area as the most civilized and well ordered place on the west coast, and when the American Lt. Colonel John C. Frémont and his California Battalion captured Santa Barbara on Christmas day in 1847, who should be waiting to greet them but a musical group of Chumash from Mission Santa Barbara playing “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”²

The early Spanish settlers declared the Santa Barbara area to be the most beautiful in either of the Californias, *Baja* (lower) or *Alta* (upper), and they called it *La Tierra Adorada*. It was a fruitful land with plenty of fresh water and a wide variety of wild game, land birds, and waterfowl. Abundant fish and shellfish provided much of the diet for the Indians populating the coast and the islands, who fashioned large boats both for fishing and paddling around the channel.³

Another feature of the “grand design” is that the chosen site is at precisely the right latitude to provide a climate ideal for humans—a wonderful micro-climate between the cold and damp to the north and the increasing heat and dryness further south. Although wearing very little or often no clothing, the largely carefree and sociable Chumash Indians along the channel were exceptionally healthy; the only possible explanation for this was the salubrious climate, which many sickly Yankees would someday discover and covet. The Franciscan fathers were so impressed with the area’s beauty and healthy climate that they built the most impressive of their twenty-one Alta California missions, the “Queen of the Missions,” overlooking Santa Barbara.



The first through train for San Francisco arrives at the Victoria Street station on March 31, 1901, after ignoring the old station. Courtesy Santa Barbara Historical Society.

more attractive two-story railroad station built just down Victoria Street from the hotel for the convenience of its guests. The excitement over the coming of the first through train for San Francisco on March 31, 1901, reached fever pitch, and many more people naturally gathered at the newer Victoria Street station than at the old one. To everyone's surprise, the train roared by the older station without slowing, and stopped at the finer Victoria station.⁴ Shortly thereafter, while the Potter was being built, the Victoria station caught fire in the middle of the night. Although one might suspect that competition between the two hotels was involved in the fire, there is no record of any investigation into either its curious timing or the decision of the through train to ignore the crowd at the older station.

The Arlington went into decline due to competition from the more elite Potter. Victoria station was dismantled, and the hotel itself burned down in 1909. But the hotel was soon rebuilt, much larger and grander than the original. Then, after two changes of both ownership and name, the Potter burned down in 1921. The new Arlington survived until Santa Barbara's great earthquake of 1925, after which it was torn down due to the damage it suffered. It was not rebuilt because the hotel business had seen further decline since the coming of the automobile, which shortened vacationers' stays to a few days.

Peter and Jennie Murphy

Dwight Murphy was born to Peter Henry Murphy and Jennie Elizabeth (Patton) Murphy in Charleston, Illinois, on January 15, 1884. Peter was bright, industrious, and fun-loving, and soft-spoken Jennie ran the family, including Peter to a great extent; although Peter also had an explosive temper, there were few arguments within the Murphy household. He had held a number of jobs with the Erie, Pennsylvania, and Union Pacific railroads, including locomotive engineer and master mechanic. The couple had four other sons and a daughter, and after Dwight was born they bought a bleak 1,000-acre Kansas farm to raise cattle in order to supplement the family income. Peter continued to work for the railroad, while Jennie ran the ranch with the help of the boys. Conditions were so bad on the harsh Kansas prairie that many farm families in the area gave up; nonetheless, the Murphys eventually saved enough money so that Peter, who was also an inventor, could quit railroading and cattle raising to go into manufacturing.

The railroads were a booming growth industry, but a serious problem plagued them: sparks from the locomotives set fire to the wooden roofs of the freight cars with disturbing regularity. So, in 1892 Peter started the P.H. Murphy Company in East St. Louis, Illinois, to produce the fireproof and water-tight “Murphy Roof.” It met with considerable success, and over the years many more products were developed, such as corrugated metal end walls that strengthened the freight cars, and pneumatic equipment. In 1898 the firm was incorporated as the Standard Railway Equipment Company. A branch was established in Chicago, and the main plant was eventually relocated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as was the Murphy home. The business has since been sold and resold a number of times.⁵

Around 1900, Peter and Jennie Murphy started to tour the country to find a healthier climate where Peter might overcome a throat ailment that had caused him to lose his voice. On their trip to San Francisco in 1904, a railroad official suggested that they “try a little town down the coast” called Santa Barbara.



Santa Barbara's waterfront, circa 1905, showing the railroad “Y” to Stearns Wharf; Potter Hotel and Edison plant at center. Courtesy Montecito History Committee.

architecture.... In Murphy's palominos, featured so prominently in the first [*sic*] and the following Old Spanish Days Fiesta, here on the streets of a California city pranced the ceremonial royal horse of Spain, golden and triumphant."¹⁵

In 1935 Leo Carrillo, star of stage and screen and internationally famous ambassador of goodwill for California's Hispanic culture, complimented Dwight Murphy by calling him "the best damn Spaniard ever born on the east coast of Ireland." Although the statement includes some geographical inaccuracy, it reflects the belief of America's best known citizen of Spanish descent that Dwight Murphy loved early California's Spanish equestrian heritage and promoted its survival with all his heart and resources. In the mid-1930s Murphy gave Carrillo a priceless golden palomino, Conquistador, which Carrillo proudly rode for years in parades throughout the West, including Santa Barbara's Old Spanish Days Fiesta.



A California don of around 1800, by Nicholas S. Firfires. Courtesy Santa Barbara Historical Society, donation of Dwight Murphy.

Chapter II

Santa Barbara's Spanish Heritage

"Now and then the veil lifts, and we get a passing glimpse of the true nature of the men who suffered and died that we, their successors, might receive this priceless heritage at their hands... bold navigators in their tiny ships in unknown waters, the desperate straining of the trail-makers...the supreme sacrifices of the missionaries for their faith, the hardships of life in the frontier settlements."

—*Nellie Van de Grift Sánchez*, *Spanish Arcadia*¹⁶

Discovery and Settlement of "La Tierra Adorada"

Most of the New World's first explorers, *conquistadores*, and settlers came from the desolate Extremadura (*Extremadura*), a region of intense heat and poor soil in southwestern Spain whose name comes from the Latin for "tough to the extreme." Pizarro, Cortés, Balboa, De Soto, and many of their followers were products of this challenging land where they developed the bold characteristics that, along with intense religious faith, suited them for the risks and hardships of exploring, conquering, and exploiting the New World. Tired of nursing their pride in poverty in the shadow of more bountiful and affluent Andalucia, Extremadura's *hidalgos* were anxious to venture forth into the unknown. But it was the aristocrats, merchants, and ship owners of Andalucia's Seville who financed these adventures and became the beneficiaries of much of the gold and silver that returned up the Guadalquivir River and made Seville the most prosperous city of Europe and Spain the most powerful country on earth. Many cities in Mexico and the American Southwest are namesakes of towns and villages in Extremadura, including Albuquerque, Trujillo, Guadalupe, and the ancient Roman regional capital Mérida. Trujillo produced more



Tower of Gold on the Guadalquivir River, Seville, Spain, an ancient Arab fortress that received gold and silver from the New World.



"The Early Vaquero," by Nicholas S. Firfires. Courtesy Los Rancheros Visitadores.

Frederick Remington was the most famous of all Western painters and sculptors, mainly because he was regarded as the most perceptive observer and admirer of the rugged life of the Old West, which he depicted with unrivaled clarity and dramatic flair. Like many other chroniclers of the fading equestrian culture in the West, he formed a romantic attachment to it and registered his dismay near the close of the century: "I knew the wild riders and vacant land were about to vanish forever. I saw the living, breathing end of three centuries of smoke and



"Cowboy," by Nicholas S. Firfires, showing a cowboy from the period around 1885.

dust and sweat, and I now see quite another thing where it all took place, but it does not appeal to me."⁷⁴ Remington's oils and bronzes stand as archetypes of the artistic genre that firmly implanted in the male psyche a love of the rugged, dangerous, and austere yet curiously romantic life of the nineteenth century *vaquero* and his buckaroo successor.

Today one often hears the word "buckaroo" applied derogatorily to someone considered to be acting precipitately, in an ungentlemanly manner, and without common sense; a "loose canon," as it were. Actually the word is a corruption of the word *vaquero*, pronounced "ba-kay'ro" in Spanish, but the proud *vaqueros*, and eventually others, came to call all of their American protégés buckaroos.

Historically, the realm of the *vaquero* and buckaroo was west of the Rockies, while that of the cowboy was to the east of them. Moreover, there were significant differences in origin—and in culture and, consequently, in horsemanship—between the two. This was true whether the horseman was white, black, brown, or red. California *vaquero*-writer Arnold R. Rojas explains: "The *vaquero* is Hispanic in origin; the cowboy is African in origin. The herdsman of the north is a composite of the two styles.

The first cowboy was a cattleman in his native habitat. The Black of Africa held his cattle so important that the handling and tending of cattle was