



# 'Ama Daisy' Saved the Rancho Mission Viejo

At one time we had many ranches surrounding our community. All are gone but one, and even that has been reduced over time. Many of the local ranches have been turned into homes, business centers, conservation areas, green belts and parks. Still, much land is used for cattle grazing and agriculture. The last ranch, Rancho Mission Viejo, came very close to being totally subdivided in 1944, thus our whole area would have been a duplicate of Anaheim or the San Fernando Valley. But thanks to a grand old lady, the large ranch was saved for her family and heirs - and quite possibly saved San Juan Capistrano, as we know it.

Marguerite Petra de la Concepcion Moore was born in Los Angeles in 1879. A fifth generation Californian, she would have added that some of her ancestors were here to greet Father Junipero Serra and Commander Gaspar de Portola when they first came to California in 1769. Marguerite was baptized in the old Plaza Church in L.A. and was in the first graduating class at Los Angeles High School in 1898. Her father, Walter S. Moore, came from Philadelphia, settled in L.A. and married Amenaïda Rafaela Lanfranco.

At a social event in the old Oceanside Hotel in 1900, Marguerite first met Richard O'Neill Jr. Shortly thereafter she left to visit a sister in South Africa and stayed for six years. She often would reminisce about the Zulu warriors and the snakes she had seen there.

## Looking Back



By Don Tryon

When Marguerite came home, she met O'Neill Jr. again and this time romance blossomed. They married in 1916 and sailed to Honolulu for their honeymoon. Then they established a home in Los Angeles.

In the meantime, Richard's brother, Jerome, managed the Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, which encompassed an area from El Toro to Oceanside, and was 35 miles long. The ranch had been owned by James Flood and managed by Richard O'Neill Sr. When Flood passed away in 1888, his son, James Flood Jr., gained ownership. He fulfilled his father's long-time promise, based on a handshake, and gave Richard Sr. half interest in the ranch.

Richard Sr. passed away in 1910 and gave his half interest in the ranch to his crippled son, Jerome, who always had an active interest in the ranch. Jerome and Flood Jr. formed their joint partnership into a corporation. The two passed away two days apart, in 1926. Jerome had established a trust dividing his half share of stock benefiting his sister, Mary Baumgartner, and his brother Richard O'Neill Jr.

In 1940 the ranch was divided up between the Flood's, Baumgartner's, and Richard O'Neill Jr. Fortunately O'Neill Jr. took the Rancho Mission Viejo portion, which was 52,000 acres in Orange Coun-

ty. In 1942 the Navy purchased the San Diego portion from the Flood's and Baumgartner's to create Camp Pendleton for the Marines.

O'Neill Jr. managed the ranch for a while, but later the Jerome O'Neill Trust hired other managers. Upon his death in 1943, the ownership of Rancho Mission Viejo remained in the trust. The beneficiaries were Marguerite, affectionately known as Daisy or "Ama Daisy", and their two children, Alice O'Neill Moiso Avery and Richard Jerome O'Neill. In 1944 the Bank Trust officers tried to sell the ranch without the beneficiaries approval. The Bank Trust had an offer of \$1.2 million; they had very little interest in ranch operations and they just wanted to get out of the situation. But Daisy refused to sell, held firm and continued operations. Her interests were in the land and what it could do for her family. Thereafter, the bank was uncooperative and indecisive. Ranch improvements were stifled, which limited the income.



Marguerite "Ama Daisy" O'Neill

But Daisy persevered. Her decisions prevailed and the ranch eventually provided a generous income.

Daisy always had a deep distrust with banks and individuals who tried to manipulate her. Her grandson, Tony Moiso, now CEO for Rancho Mission Viejo, likes to tell the story of when he was

twenty-three, he was urged to talk to her about the family idea of developing a portion of the ranch. Other interests were encouraging her to accept another plan - one the family felt was unacceptable. Tony was successful, but Daisy said, "Okay, if that's what you and (uncle) Richard want to do. Take care of the Ranch, watch out for connivers, and be sure that I get paid." As a result, a partnership was formed with Donald Bren, and it was called the Mission Viejo Company. This company was formed to develop what is known today as the City of Mission Viejo.

Tony Moiso has a great affection for his "Ama Daisy", as she would often take him on many visits to the Ranch, to the horse races, visiting old timers in Oceanside and San Juan Capistrano, and to eat at the former Las Rosas Café, where the Birtcher Plaza is now, and later to the El Adobe Restaurant. She always admonished him to "eat beef." Interestingly, years later, the land and building that the El Adobe is located were acquired by Rancho Mission Viejo.

The Portola Riders have dedicated a plaque at the Campo de los Amantes on the Ranch to Daisy. It quotes her as saying, "Always take care of the Ranch; It has always taken care of the family." The O'Neill heirs have done just that and they feel she would have approved their stewardship. As a result of having just a few in control, the developments have been well planned, with huge tracts donated for parks and conservation areas, and still much land set aside for grazing and crops.

Marguerite "Daisy" O'Neill passed away at the age of 102 in 1981 and she has left us all with a great legacy.

*(Don Tryon is the Director and Archivist for the San Juan Capistrano Historical Society.)*



Richard O'Neill Jr. & Marguerite

