Finding Aid to the Miehle and Sepulveda Family Papers MSA.31

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Title: Miehle and Sepulveda Family Papers
Identifier/Call Number: MSA.31
Contributing Institution: Autry National Center, Autry Library
Language of Material: Spanish; Castilian
Storage Unit: 1
Physical Description: 2.0 Linear feet1 box
Date (inclusive): 1834-1952
Abstract: The Sepulveda family played a prominent role in Southern California history and development. The most well-known family branch were the recipients of a 35,000 acre land grant that later became Rancho Palos Verdes. This collection spans 1834-1952 and includes clippings, correspondence, diaries, family and legal documents, maps, and photographs from various members and associates of one of the family branches.
Language: Spanish and English.
creator: Figueroa, Jose C.
creator: Leach, Clyde M.
creator: Sepulveda, Juan C.
Access
Collection is open for research. Appointments to view materials are required. To make an appointment please visit http://theautry.org/research/research-rules-and-application or contact library staff at rroom@theautry.org.
Use
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Preferred citation
Miehle and Sepulveda Family Papers, 1834-1952, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MSA.31; [folder number] [folder title][date].
Acquisition
Donation from the Miehle and Biegler families to the Museum of the American West, 2006 August 25.
Biographical/Historical note
The history of the Sepulveda family in the southern California neighborhood of Palos Verdes begins in 1784 with Juan Jose Dominguez, a soldier with the Spanish military. Dominguez had traveled north from Mexico with the 1769 Spanish Portola Expedition, ordered by King Charles III of Spain to gain a foothold in the Spanish territory that is present-day California and to replace the expelled Jesuits with Franciscan missionaries. During this expedition, Dominguez and the rest of the fleet provided protection to Junipero Serra as he and other padres established missions stretching from San Diego to Monterey. Once the expedition was completed, Dominguez and his family remained in California, as did Dominguez’s lieutenant during the expedition, Pedro Fages. In 1784, Fages, who was now Governor of California, bestowed a land grant to Dominguez of 75,000 acres covering land that is now known as San Pedro, Palos Verdes, Carson, and Dominguez Hills. This grant and two others were the first Spanish land grants in California. The process of establishing land grants during this Spanish colonial period was a little less formal than usual: an individual only had to present a petition, a description of the property, a map, and proof of occupation. This land would be fought over continually, by individuals at first, but also by federal governments, as the land passed from the hands of Spain to Mexico to the United States of America. In 1809, Juan Jose Dominguez died and left his land to his nephew Cristobal Dominguez, who was stationed with the military in San Juan Capistrano at the time. Since Cristobal would remain in San Juan Capistrano for the foreseeable future, Juan Jose Dominguez named Manuel Gutierrez executor of the estate. In 1821, Gutierrez established the land as his own, assuming that Cristobal had abandoned his interest in the property. Gutierrez then granted a permit to his friend Jose Dolores Sepulveda allowing Sepulveda to graze his cattle in the region known as Rancho Palos Verdes. Also in 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain and reclaims California. Cristobal Dominguez, though remaining in the San Diego area, was concerned that he was losing control of his property and started trying to fight for it. In 1822, a land grant was formalized in Cristobal’s favor, and Jose Dolores Sepulveda appealed the decision. He traveled north in 1824 to pursue a resolution and was killed in an American Indian uprising near Lompoc. Sepulveda left behind five children, Juan Capistrano, Jose Loreto, Ygnacio Rafael, Jose Diego, and Maria Teresa, whom he named in his will as heirs to the land. Cristobal died the following year, leaving his land to his six children, favoring his youngest, Manuel Dominguez. The Sepulveda heirs continued to work
the land and continued to be challenged by the Dominguez heirs. As part of their claim, the Sepulveda family asserted the land was entirely unoccupied when they encountered it, and that they made substantial improvements to it by working the land and adding cattle. In 1834, Governor Jose Figueroa tried to settle the ongoing land dispute. In Figueroa’s ruling, Gutierrez could continue to pasture his cattle but must forfeit his ownership of this part of the land, known as Rancho San Pedro; the Dominguez heirs were named the legal owners of Rancho San Pedro; and the Sepulvedas were given the legal title to Rancho Palos Verdes, with the opportunity to expand into the Rancho San Pedro portion. This settlement worked until 1841 when the Sepulvedas were challenged again. They pledged their case to Governor Pio Pico, a family associate, who ruled in their favor in 1846. Also in 1846, the United States of America started fighting Mexico for ownership of California. In 1848, California was annexed to the United States of America under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and granted statehood in 1850. The validity of Spanish and Mexican land grants was questioned by the United States. The Land Act of 1851 was established to “ascertain and settle the private land claims in California.” Over five years, the commission tried 800 cases, regarding 12,000,000 acres of land. 520 cases were approved; 273 were rejected. The demands of the commission were geographically, linguistically, and financially treacherous for the Spanish-speaking settlers of California, many of whom were descendants of the original land grantees. The majority of the proceedings were held in San Francisco, which made legal and travel expenses detrimental to many land owners fighting for their titles. It is estimated that one in ten land owners was reduced to bankruptcy, and 40% of the land in question was abandoned to meet the costs incurred.

The Sepulveda family met with success and their grant of 31,629 acres, United States Land Commission case number 446, was approved. The dispute did not end here, and the Dominguez family continued to fight the Sepulveda family for the title to the land. An 1856 ruling in the U.S. District Court favored the Sepulveda family, so the Dominguez family appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1858, the U.S. Supreme Court decided not to hear the case, and President James Buchanan issued a patent for the land, granting 43,000 acres to the Dominguez family and 31,000 acres to the Sepulveda family. After 1858, land titles continued to change hands as the Sepulveda heirs married into other families and names, traded land with each other, and bought and sold small portions. Between 1865 and 1880, the land owned by the Sepulveda family was the subject of over 70 lawsuits. In 1882, the land was divided into 17 portions. Jotham Bixby, who had started buying adjoining pieces of land from the Sepulveda heirs, was granted one of the largest of these portions: 17,085 acres. Bixby passed down his share to his son George in 1894. Although ownership was somewhat settled by the turn of the 20th century, lawsuits against the Bixby and Sepulveda families continued into the 1930s.

The Sepulveda family tree

Juan Jose Sepulveda (born circa 1764) married Maria Tomasa Gutierrez (born circa 1769) in 1786. Their son Jose Dolores Sepulveda (1793-1824) married Maria Ygnacia Avila in 1813. They had five children:

1. Juan Capistrano Sepulveda (1814-1896)
   - Married Felipa Alanis in 1836
   - Married Susana Ruiz (1853-1923) in 1868
      -- Their daughter Elisa Sepulveda married Chester Miehle
2. Jose Loreto Sepulveda (1815-1881)
   - Married Cesaria Pantoja in 1835
   - Married Teodocia Gonzalez in 1875
3. Ygnacio Rafael Sepulveda (1819-1847)
4. Jose Diego Sepulveda (1820-1869)
   - Married Maria Francisca Elizalde in 1843
5. Maria Teresa Sepulveda (1823-1840)
   - Married Nathaniel Pryor in 1838

Scope and contents

This archive contains documents relating to early California land owners the Sepulveda family including business records, clippings, correspondence, journals, ledgers, legal documents, maps, notebooks, photographs, receipts, tax information, a letter from the U.S. Patent Office, and copies of legal documents and correspondence not contained within the collection. Materials include a blueprint, business cards, clippings, leather-bound journals, a ledger book, photographs, and rolled notes. The large bound ledger in this collection is a record of cattle bought, sold, and slaughtered by Juan Sepulveda, with entries starting October 1, 1857. The inscription on the title page of the ledger names Juan Sepulveda as the commissioner named by the assembly of distributors and owners of livestock in Los Angeles County.

Correspondents include John G. Bell, Leonides Day, Morton E. Feiler, Feiler & Feiler, Jose C. Figueroa, E. E. Hewitt, Clyde M. Leach (Assistant City Attorney), Everett W. Mattoon by way of A. Curtis Smith, D. K. Parrott, Ismaela M. Polk, Joseph Scott, Andrew Sepulveda, Juan Sepulveda, Susanna Sepulveda, and Abel Stearns. The blueprint in the collection is a copy of the

**Processing History**
Processing and finding aid completed by Holly Rose Larson, NHPRC Project Archivist, March 2, 2012, made possible through grant funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

**Related Archival Materials**
Autry National Center; 2006.75.1
Jotham Bixby et al., plaintiffs, vs. H.K.W. Bent et al., defendants: Final decree. Superior Court Case 2373 : (transcript); mssFAC 1515. The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
Santa Clara Land Papers. The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

**Separated Materials**
This collection of papers was received by the Autry National Center in a painted steamer trunk. The papers were removed from the trunk, which is maintained by Museum Collections staff as item 2006.75.1.

**Subjects and Indexing Terms**
Sepulveda, Family
California -- History -- 19th century
California -- History -- 20th century
Clippings
Correspondence
Diaries
Land grants -- California
Ledgers
Legal documents
Maps
Photographs
Rancho Palos Verdes (Calif.)
Receipts (financial records)