

The Bad Boys of Branciforte

200th anniversary of early villa



The Lorenzana family (on horseback and (seated, far left) are among the interesting characters who lived at Branciforte during the Wild West days.

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SANTA CRUZ MAY have a reputation today as a laid-back kind of town where people are peaceful and most of the shootings are done by tourists taking pictures of the Boardwalk for the family album.

But Santa Cruz wasn't always that way.

In the rough and tumble days of its founding, a part of Santa Cruz was as woolly as any Wild West town.

It was called the Villa de Branciforte and there on the banks of the San Lorenzo River, people partied, danced and raised general heck while trying to establish a prosperous community that would eventually become part of Santa Cruz.

This month, the Museum of Art and History and the City of Santa Cruz mark the 200th anniversary of the founding of this historic enclave with tours, lectures and exhibits.

Among them is a cemetery tour featuring the Bad Boys of Branciforte.

VILLA DE BRANCIFORTE was established in 1797 when the Spanish government "recruited" eight criminals from Guadalajara to settle the land that stretched from Lighthouse Point to Aptos Creek.

They were promised an adobe house, farm implements, two horses and yearly grants.

But reality was much different.

"At first they were literally living naked in the woods," said Phil Reader, a local historian and expert on Villa de Branciforte.

But the little settlement across the river from the ever-disapproving mission padres took root and survived.

More settlers came and they raised cattle, planted grain and, when they weren't working, embarked on elaborate parties that sometimes lasted for an entire month.

But it was a Sodom and Gomorrah kind of place too, with murders, arson and a lot of horse-stealing.

"It really was the frontier," said Reader, standing next to a museum photo of the father of one of the settlement's most notorious families.

"Branciforte was a pretty wild place. For awhile, no marshal would go there."

Take, for example, the Rodriguez family, one of the early residents of Villa de Branciforte. They were a mostly respectable group of people, but one day a rebellious branch of this sprawling family shot up the town of Santa Cruz, galloping through Front Street's



Phil Reader is an expert on Villa de Branciforte.

red-light district with guns blazing — and eventually shooting the marshal dead on the spot where the post office is located today.

The culprits fled up to the Vine Hill area, where they hid on the ranch of another Branciforte family, the Lorenzanas.

Their deeds left the people of Santa Cruz pretty unhappy.

A posse gathered and headed up Branciforte Avenue toward the Lorenzana ranch. But what they didn't reckon on was the Rodriguez boys being able to see them coming.

Most of the guys fled into the woods, but one hapless bandit decided to hole up under a haystack in the barn, said Reader.

The posse searched high and low and were ready to leave empty-handed when they spotted something suspicious.

"They saw one of the kids leaning up against the barn as if he was talking to someone," said Reader.

They came back and surrounded the barn while deputy sheriff Charlie Lincoln tucked his gun into his belt and climbed up into the hayloft to search.

One touch of a man's shoulder in the hay and both Lincoln and the troublemaker leaped from the hayloft to the barn floor, where Lincoln discovered, to his horror, that his gun was still in the hayloft.

"Get him, boys," the deputy shouted. And his eager posse started firing, shooting off Lincoln's hat in the process.

But they killed the bandit, Francisco Barcenas, and they took his body back down to town, where they laid it out in front of what was the Cooper House, as a lesson for everyone.

There were scores of murders during those early years of Villa de Branciforte, said Reader, who has spent years gathering the settlement's history.

There was the murder of the brother-in-law of a county supervisor which drew a mob of vigilantes, who tied stones to a man who had turned state's evidence and tossed him into the ocean so he drowned.

The trouble was, they killed the only witness to the killing and the real murderer went free.

Then there was Augustus Castro, who robbed his grandfather of \$40,000, then lost it all gambling and Jenny Ramos — who married five men, three of whom landed in prison.

As Reader talked about Branciforte's history, he pulled out a photo of two men hanging by their necks from the

Water Street Bridge.

The two were accused of killing a man for money to go to the circus.

They robbed him of 75 cents in coin — but didn't know about paper money, so left more than \$100 behind.

The picture shows the two dead robbers surrounded by a group of Santa Cruz onlookers.

"The picture used to hang in some bars as a warning to those who didn't pay their bar bills," said Reader.

A look at the life of some of Santa Cruz's earliest settlers, including its model citizens, will be explored in the coming week. Events include:

Walking Tour of Holy Cross

Cemetery: Hear the stories of some of Branciforte's founders during a living history tour today from 1-3 p.m. at the cemetery off Capitola Road Extension. The event is free.

The Last Gasp of the Spanish

Empire: a panel discussion Friday at 7 p.m. at the Museum of Art and History.

Voices and Stories of Daily Life: a panel discussion next Saturday at 2:30 p.m. at the museum.

Meet the Authors of the Special Branciforte Issue of the History Journal: next Saturday at 1 p.m. at the museum.

A Family Fandango: dancing, crafts and story-acting Oct. 19 from noon to 5 p.m. at the museum.

Bad Boys of Branciforte: A cemetery tour at Evergreen Cemetery next to Harvey West Park from 4-6 p.m. Oct. 25. Admission is \$3 and children are free.

Museum exhibits: An ongoing gathering of artifacts from the Branciforte period are at the museum, along with an art exhibit of the California missions and exquisitely embroidered silk shawls are at the museum.

For more information about events, call 429-1964.