

“The Early Years...Bolado Park”

Anyone who has lived in San Benito County even for a short time has probably heard of, or attended an event at Bolado Park. For those of us who grew-up here, Bolado Park is part of our roots, our own histories. When you visit other areas of California or other states, local residents refer to their “Fairgrounds”. In contrast, we refer to Bolado Park a member of the community...we’re all on a first-name basis with “Bolado”. We recognize Bolado Park as a very special place and are very grateful for the gift the Bolado Ashe Davis family gave to community and County long ago.

What are now the park grounds were originally part of a huge Mexican Land Grant, called Rancho Santa Ana y Quien Sabe which was granted to Juan Anzar and Manuel Larios in 1834. After the death of Larios in 1865, the largest portion was purchased by a Spaniard named Joaquin Bolado, who had come to California via Mexico on 1849. Bolado and his partner, Jose Arques, purchased the land at a public auction in 1867 at the Plaza Hotel in the then bustling town of San Juan Bautista. Bolado paid for the land with two sacks of gold, valued at \$6,700. Arques was later bought-out of his 1/3 interest in the property. Bolado called his ranch Santa Anita Rancho (little Santa Ana) as it came from the original Santa Ana land grant that extended from the Tres Pinos area, across Santa Ana Valley and up to the crest of the Quien Sabe hills including some 48,000 acres.

When Bolado came to California, he was an astute businessman and recognized that the “hunt for gold” provided opportunities beyond “mining for gold”. He opened a store offering general merchandise near the mines in the Sierra foothills. In a short period of time, he was able to buy an interest in a ranch owned by other Spaniards in the San Luis Obispo area. He and his partners were then able to supply meat to the miners seeking their fortunes and for the growing population of San Francisco. With hard work and smart business decisions, the partnership’s profits reached \$200,000.00 within six years.

In 1857, Joaquin Bolado married Julia Abrego, who was the niece of Juan Bautistia Alvarado, Governor of California and General Vallejo...both well-known early California families. They lived in Monterey for several years close to Julia’s family and then moved to San Francisco. In 1862, the young couple departed by ship to visit England, Europe and Bolado’s family in Spain. The weather in California in the early 1860s was extreme...there were two of the wettest years that had ever been recorded and followed by an extremely dry year. Cattle and horses perished by the thousands by drowning or starving. Upon their return to California, the impact to Joaquin Bolado’s’ San Luis Obispo holdings was severe. These tough years marked the end of many of the Spanish and Mexican great ranchos for most of the owners had become deeply in debt to the newcomers and were wiped-out by their heavy losses. Bolado minimized his expenses and focused his energies on the Santa Anita Rancho. He also still had banking interests in San Francisco and in Hollister. He was President of the Farmers Warehouse Company in Tres Pinos where he was credited with doing much for the economy of the community. He was a large customer shipping his grain, hay, hides, dairy products and wool from the local train station at Tres Pinos to points north.

Joaquin and Julia's only surviving child, Julia, was born in 1864. Her nickname was "Dulse" which translates to "Sweetness" from Spanish. This JULIA was the one who would eventually donate the land we now know as Bolado Park to honor her father. Julia married Gaston Ashe in 1891 and they lived at the Ranch enjoying quite the social scene. Mr. Ashe spent his wife's money freely but not wisely and she divorced him in 1908. She eventually remarried to Francis Davis in 1922 and they lived near his family in Santa Cruz and San Francisco but came to the Ranch for regular visits. The land along the Tres Pinos River with its' River willows and large shady oak trees held a special place in Julia's heart. Over the years, Julia arranged for young boys with a counselor from San Francisco to come and camp and have adventures along the creek, giving them the opportunity to get out of the City.

The annual San Benito County Fair had been held since 1919 at the high school grounds in Hollister. In 1922, a rain-swollen San Benito River flooded this area, so the county Farm Bureau got permission to stage the county fair on Mrs. Bolado Davis' property south of Tres Pinos.

In previous years, Mrs. Bolado Davis had allowed the Farm Bureau to hold their annual picnic on the property. A committee of three members from the Farm Bureau were appointed to meet with Mrs. Davis to see about obtaining a long term lease to use this property. The three men were WI Hawkins, Waldo Rohnert and SC Hain. The Hollister Advance and The Santa Cruz Evening newspapers both noted in August of 1923, that Bolado Park was to become a county recreation center with the announcement of the signing of a 15 year lease with the Farm Bureau with an option to renew for another 15 years. The very generous annual rent was one dollar payable in gold coin in advance. Mrs. Davis and her family did retain the mining and mineral rights in addition to the water rights. This first lease also specified that no trees could be destroyed or injured.

WI (Washington Irving) Hawkins was one of the leasers and he financed and built the swimming pool and the big Pavilion that was to be used by community groups for their events. Community fund raisers were organized to support the development of the Park. Of particular note was a Wild West Show and activities at the Park, the weekend of September 3, 1923. The Wild West Show was held at the Hollister Ball Grounds which were "fitted-up with corrals and strong fences". What we now know as Veteran's Park and specifically the Babe Ruth ball field was the location of the Show. Events included Steer Riding, a Girls Novelty Race, Riding of Bucking Horses, Men's Stake Race, Roping calves, Trick Roping and Riding, horseback Musical Chairs, an exhibition of Polo Ponies, Quick Change Race, Maverick Race, an exhibition of Sled Dogs and Men's Potato Race. Following the list of events and the starting time of the Wild West Show, the newspaper gave directions to Bolado Park and listed the various musical performances that would be presented that same day during an evening concert. An Open Air Dance on the "new" floor was to begin at 9:30pm. A ten-piece band had been secured to provide the music for the dancers who were going to enjoy the 11,520 square feet of permanent tongue and groove flooring (now the Pavilion). Attendees were assured that five acres of parking would be available and the grounds would be well-lit and guarded.

A short article in the San Benito Advance noted that due to strong advance sales of over \$800 for the Wild West Show in the afternoon and the concert and dance in the evening, the Committee in charge of the event believed the entire floor could be paid from the proceeds from the day. The newspaper certainly did its part by printing headlines on the front page "BUY TICKET TODAY FOR WILD WEST SHOW. HELP SAN BENITO COUNTYS' PLAY GROUND". A follow-up article in the newspaper a couple of days later noted "the much talked about Wild West Show has come and gone and proved itself a great success". The final sentence of the article stated "the Committee deserves a great credit for pulling off such a good show and we feel the crowd liked it enough to want to see another in the future". Sounds like the early beginnings of the Saddle Horse Association shows. The Free Lance noted an announcement several weeks later that the American Legion Armistice Day dance would be held at Bolado Park and a percentage of proceeds would be donated to the Farm Bureau to assist with the development of the county's new recreation center.

The initial 1923 lease was for 15 years and was renewed early on April 1, 1933. The second lease was for 10 years and the rent was \$25 per month. The second lease also included an exclusive option to purchase 51 acres for \$10,000.00 and the property where the golf course was being developed would be donated as part of the transaction. The leaser could build structures and make improvements with the exception of burying pipelines. There was no mention of mineral, mining or water rights but the Bolado Davis family did reserve the option of playing golf at no charge.

In 1937, the 33rd District of the Agricultural Association had been created. On April 27, 1938, Julia Bolado Davis and her two sons, Farragut and Gaston, "gave and granted" the District the deed to the property, noting the Park would officially be known as Bolado Park to honor her father. JM Leonard and Roy Hubbell accepted the deed on behalf of the 33rd District Board of Directors. The deed was subject to the existing leases held by WI Hawkins and the golf club but they were not anticipated to interfere with the buildings and improvements being planned by the District.

The front page headlines from the Free Lance and the Advance announced the generous gift from the Bolado Davis family and a public dinner and reception was planned...hundreds of county residents were anticipated to attend the function. As for the formal clearing of the property deed, it was 1943 before the District was able to resolve the financial concerns of the primary leaser, WI Hawkins and three other neighbors whose' property had been included in the arena and race track built by the Saddle Horse Association.

The years during World War II were tough ones for our country, county and Bolado. Due to the War emergency, there was a statewide ban on horse racing and consequent loss of pari-mutual revenue drastically impacted funding. Rationing of gas and tires also put a clamp-down on travel for all. Although, more "boys" camping along the River. The Army made arrangements to station troops at Bolado Park from February of 1942 through June of 1945. They agreed to vacate the Park if needed between June and October so as to not interrupt the annual events of the community. The Army paid rent to the 33rd District for the use of the Park and WI Hawkins for the use of the facilities he had developed.

Here are a couple of first-hand Bolado remembrances from the 1930s from long-time County residents. Helen Matulich recalls that the Ranchers who lived in the southern portion of the County would provide a ranch hand if possible to help drive the horses to Bolado on Tuesday and Wednesday in preparation of the annual Saddle Horse Show. There would be a parade Thursday afternoon and sign-up for events would occur directly after the Parade. The Show was Friday, Saturday and Sunday and all the livestock for the events were provided by the local Ranchers...bulls and all. As travel was a bit slower in those days, once you got to Bolado, you stayed there. Helen remembers that they would build a wooden shack to store the saddles and gear and used willows for tie-racks for the horses. Camping out along the River was always a good time and neighbors enjoyed visiting with each other.

Al Bonturi remembers his father taking him to Bolado to go swimming when he was a little boy in the early 30s. The swimming pool that WI Hawkins built had heated water, which encouraged use of the pool early and late in the year. In those days, a heated pool was quite the novelty. Al remembers his father telling him WI Hawkins was a clever fellow as he had developed a system to pump the water from the pool to the top of the metal Pavilion roof and then channeled it back to the pool. Not only was the water warmed up, the roof and Pavilion were cooled down.

Many people from this Community have contributed to maintaining Bolado Park in many ways over the years. Your contribution is needed and appreciated.

Resources:

Pat and David Newman

RanchoBolado.com

East of the Gablians by Marjorie Pierce

33rd Agricultural District Board Meeting Minutes

Helen Matulich

Al Bonturi

John Barrett

The Hollister Advance newspaper: September 1923, May 1938

The Free Lance newspaper: September 1923, May 1938, January 1967, June 1978

Santa Cruz Evening News: August 1923

Prepared by Martha Tobias

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