

GARDENA'S GROWTH: From Ranches to Schools

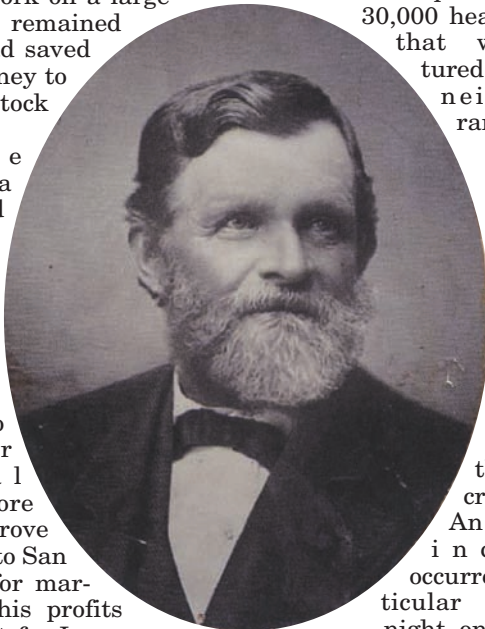
BY JAMES OSBORNE
SPECIAL TO THE GVN

One of the first settlers to follow Gen. William Starke Rosecrans into the region of Southern California, which eventually became the City of Gardena, was Domingo Amestoy.

He was born in 1822 in the Basque village of France, known as St. Pierre D' Irube. At the age of 14, after completing his early education, he traveled to Argentina to learn the trade of shoemaking.

Like many other young men who ventured to California during the gold rush in hopes of striking it rich, Amestoy left Argentina in 1851 on a journey to California which lasted six months. After arriving in San Francisco, Amestoy traveled to the placer mines located in Tuolumne County. While there he found work on a large ranch and remained until he had saved enough money to buy some stock of his own.

He acquired a small herd and drove them south to Santa Barbara. The cattle were allowed to graze for several weeks before Amestoy drove them back to San Francisco for market. With his profits he then left for Los Angeles and worked for a sheep rancher by the name of Noriega. He again saved his money until he was able to purchase his own flock of sheep.



Growth and Expansion

In 1862 he returned for a short time to France where he married Marie Elizabeth Higuere, who was born in 1843. Shortly thereafter they returned to California where their union would eventually produce 13 children.

To earn enough money to buy additional sheep and land, the couple started a laundry service in Los Angeles. Domingo could be seen leading a horse with a large basket strapped to either side to collect and deliv-

er the clothes. But poor Marie did the actual washing of the dirty clothes in an open tub.

In 1875 Amestoy purchased 800 acres of land at \$50 per acre from the famous Civil War general, William Starke Rosecrans. This land was in an area known later as Strawberry Park, and which today comprises a large portion of what eventually became Gardena.

The modern boundary of the Amestoy Ranch would approximately be Vermont Avenue on the east, Prairie Avenue on the west, Rosecrans Avenue on the north and Marine Avenue on the south.

Amestoy was responsible for introducing Merino sheep and Rambouillet rams on his ranch which revolutionized sheep breeding in Southern California. He is also considered to be the first man to import sheep into Los Angeles County. By

1880 he reportedly owned 30,000 head of sheep that were pastured on his, and neighboring ranches.

A lot of bull

The nearest neighbors of the

Amestoy's during the 1800s was the Rosecrans family.

An amusing incident occurred one particular moonlit night on the Rosecrans' ranch, involving a visit by the Amestoy bull. The bull had escaped his corral and had come over to the Rosecrans ranch only to become entangled in the wire fence surrounding the ranch.

The bull was unable to free itself from the wire, which caused it to become infuriated. Its roaring woke Gen. Rosecrans' son, Carl, who immediately grabbed the general's sword that hung on the wall in the house, and while still in his nightclothes, went after the bull.

He began jabbing the bull in the rump, but that only made matters worse when the bull ran through the fence in the other direction. Eventually,



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DEEP IN HISTORY—Amestoy School was established in 1916, as a branch of Gardena Elementary School.

toward early morning, the Amestoy's hired girl, who was French and spoke very little English, came over to fetch the bull.

She yelled at him in French while gently pricking it with the end of a pitchfork. After enough prodding, the bull finally broke free and turned for home.

Another time the Rosecrans' bull, Jerry, got loose and started roaring out in a field near their home. The Amestoy bull, which was about a half a mile away, heard Jerry and started to roar back. Then the Amestoy bull knocked down its fence and went to meet Jerry to start a real bullfight.

Although the Amestoy bull was smaller and didn't roar as loud, it still charged at Jerry who dropped his tail and started to run for home with the Amestoy bull in hot pursuit. The Amestoy bull stood out in front of the Rosecrans home roaring and pounding the earth after defeating Jerry.

This episode made Gen. Rosecrans very angry at Jerry and he told his son, "Get a gun and shoot that dammed bull! We won't have a coward on this ranch!"

Sound investments

Domingo Amestoy's fortunes continued to grow during the late 1800s. In 1871 he, along with three other Los Angeles investors of French origin, each subscribed \$500,000 of capital to establish the Farmers and Merchants Bank. The building that housed the Farmers and Merchants Bank, which was designed in the

Classical Revival style, still exists in downtown Los Angeles as Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument No. 271.

By 1888 Amestoy had constructed the "Amestoy Building," which once stood on North Main Street near the present Los Angeles City Hall. Amestoy, in fact, owned the entire block where the building once stood.

The Los Angeles Herald Examiner declared the building to be the city's "first skyscraper," although it reached only three stories. For a time

gaining the Rancho Los Encinos, Domingo Amestoy's wife, Marie died on March 17, 1891. Soon after, Domingo himself died at age 70, on Jan. 11, 1892 at his Gardena ranch.

At the time of his death, Amestoy was one of the wealthiest men in Southern California. Besides being on the Board of Directors for Farmers and Merchants Bank, he was one of the original members of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. He was also, at one time, considered the largest taxpayer in the county of Los Angeles.

The Amestoy family retained the Gardena ranch until 1901, when it was sold for

\$125 per acre. However, the Amestoy name continued to live on in Gardena.

The original street name of Marine Avenue was actually Amestoy Avenue up until the 1930s, when it was changed to Compton Boulevard.

And Amestoy Avenue School was established in 1916 as a branch of Gardena Elementary School. It started with two wood frame bungalows and housed forty students plus two teachers.

Today, Amestoy Elementary School continues to educate children at 1048 West 149th St. in Gardena and serves as a lasting memorial to one of Gardena's earliest pioneers.

James Osborne is an author of South Bay history and was a contributor to the book: "Gardena" published by Arcadia Publishing in 2006. His family was among the early settlers in the Gardena area, arriving in 1902.

Gardena Valley Yesterday & Today

the building housed the Los Angeles Supreme Court.

The building also reportedly contained one of Los Angeles' first elevators, along with "Fagan's Cafeteria and Fountain" on the first floor. The Amestoy Building was eventually demolished in 1958 to make way for a parking lot.

In 1889 Amestoy bought the 4,460 acre "Rancho Los Encinos" located in the San Fernando Valley. He purchased the old rancho from his son-in-law, Simon Gless, who had inherited it after the death of his uncle, Gaston Oxarart, in 1886.

Adobe ranch

Today, visitors to Los Encinos State Park, located in the City of Encino at the corner of Balboa and Ventura Boulevard, can tour the recently restored old adobe ranch home situated in the park beside a quiet lake. Unfortunately, not long after

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