

An El Toro Family Touched By Tragedy

The close-knit Daguerre clan holds a significant and heartrending chapter in California's Basque saga.

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A few weeks ago, while researching the Moulton family, I came across a photocopied item of correspondence, typed on the letterhead of Glen E. Mathis, El Toro Cattle Co.

Mathis was the husband of Charlotte Moulton, eldest daughter of Louis and Nellie Moulton. For a number of years—along with his sister-in-law Louise Moulton Hanson—he supervised the family's land holdings.

The “voice” on the undated and unsigned letter, however, is definitely that of Charlotte. Her descriptions of the photos that accompany the correspondence have a distinctly personal feel. Here is the beginning of what she says about the photo accompanying today's column:

“Jean Pierre Daguerre with his wife, Marie Eugenie, their son, Domingo, and their daughters, from left to right: Josephine, Juanita (later Mrs. Frank Seidel), and Grace. There were two other children, John and Lucy, who died in infancy.”

As I've continued to research El Toro, I've been drawn to stories of family life. And when I attended last month's Pioneer Roundup at Heritage Hill Historical Park, it was like living history to see so many of those families—Serrano, Cope, Changala, Nieblas, Bennett, Osterman and others—represented on the sign-in sheet.

One family, however, is unlikely to ever be represented, and this is their story.

Old World Origins

As Charlotte Moulton Mathis indicates, the Daguerres, like many families in those days, suffered the loss of young children. But it should be noted that the Daguerre offspring you see pictured—Josephine (born May 4, 1892), Juanita (Dec. 21, 1888), Grace (June 12, 1890) and Domingo (September 1887)—were all healthy births, and survived into active and attractive young adulthood.

Let's return to Charlotte's description.

“Mr. Daguerre, with his family, came to the Moulton Ranch in the 1890s. The ranch was at that time a sheep ranch and Mr. Daguerre was a sheepman. He had come from France as a shepherd and had in due time acquired his own band of sheep. Mrs. Daguerre, too, was born in France.”

As California began to transition from the ranchero and gold rush periods to a time of settlers and settlements, one of the most influential groups of immigrants to what later became San Joaquin, Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Orange counties arrived from the Basque country that straddles France and Spain. The reasons for leaving were chiefly political and economic. Many initially moved to South America. Then, upon hearing about the California gold fields, they headed here.

Such was not the case, however, with Jean Pierre Daguerre. Born in Hasparren, France, in May 1856, he immigrated to the Los Angeles area in the spring of 1874 with members of another French Basque family, the Amestoys, who were sponsored by Amestoys already established in the area.

Domingo Amestoy had arrived some 20 years earlier and, from an initially modest sheep business, amassed a fortune. This enabled him to purchase a portion of what was then known as the Rosecrans Rancho in what is now Gardena. It was to this ranch that Jean Pierre would contribute his own considerable expertise.

Great Happiness...

By 1882, however, Daguerre decided to strike out on his own, moving south to what is now Orange County. There, he formed a partnership with Marco Forster, son of the famous landholder John "Don Juan" Forster. Four years later, after becoming what novelists might term "a man of substance," Daguerre returned to the Amestoy ranch to claim Maria Eugenia Duguet as his wife.

Maria and Jean Pierre had met on the boat from Havre, France, to New York City, along with other members of the Amestoy family. The tight-knit group of Basque immigrants continued on to San Francisco, arriving in San Pedro in June 1874. Maria, the fourth of six children, had been educated at the convent of St. Pierre de Yrube, and was the only one of her family to immigrate to America. Obviously, Jean Pierre had never forgotten the attractive young woman, eight years his junior, who had stayed on with the Amestoys.

On Oct. 7, 1886, they were married at the Rosecrans Rancho. Their first child, a son, was born the following September and named for their mentor and sponsor, Domingo Amestoy.

Jean Pierre continued to be a man on a mission. By the early 1890s, after dissolving his partnership with Forster, he formed what would evolve into an extremely lucrative partnership with fellow sheep rancher Lewis Fenno Moulton, owner of the 22,000-acre Moulton Niguel Ranch.

"The title records of the ranch reveal that he was deeded a one-third interest in the Moulton Ranch on October 31, 1908."

...Followed By Great Sorrow

At this point, Domingo Daguerre was in his early 20s and learning the ranching trade from his father. The three Daguerre daughters were in their teenage years. The Daguerre and Moulton residences were close to each other, and the little Moulton girls took delight in driving their pony cart to the Daguerre ranch to visit Maria and her daughters.

Like their husbands, Mrs. Daguerre and Mrs. Moulton were good friends, and Lewis Moulton & Co.—in the process of transitioning from sheep to more profitable cattle—was recognized as a phenomenally successful enterprise.

Then tragedy struck.

"[Mr. Daguerre] was fatally injured in 1911 when his team of horses, frightened by an automobile on the Gavilan hill between El Toro and San Juan Capistrano, bolted and overturned the wagon."

Domingo now shouldered the responsibility of the Daguerre partnership. He was a hard-working and highly esteemed young man. Everyone assumed he, like his father, would eventually marry a Basque woman and begin his own family.

Then a dreaded pandemic that already had caused millions of deaths, both in the United States and abroad, made its way to Orange County.

“Domingo, a bachelor, died at age 31 of the deadly influenza-pneumonia that swept the country following World War I. He died at home on January 11, 1919.”

Four years later, in his 1923 History of Orange County, Samuel Armor stated: “After the death of Mr. Daguerre on May 5, 1911, Mrs. Daguerre, who had been a true helpmate in sharing the business responsibilities of her husband, continued in the partnership, and still owns a third interest in the ranch...Mrs. Daguerre resides in her comfortable residence on the Moulton ranch with her three loving daughters, who shower on her their affectionate care and devotion, and assist her in the management of the large interests left by her husband, thus doing all they can to shield her from unnecessary worry and care. ... The family take an active part in civic matters.”

As for the ranch? “Upwards of fifteen tenants are engaged in raising beans, grain and hay on its extensive acreage. In addition, the Moulton Company is engaged in raising beef cattle on an immense scale, their herd of high-grade Durhams being one of the finest in the county.”

A Family Interrupted

Clara Mason Fox, Joe Osterman and others have noted that both Nellie Moulton and Maria Daguerre soldiered on after they became widows. (Lewis Moulton would pass away in 1938.)

But while the Moulton girls grew up, went to college, and eventually married, life for the Daguerre sisters seems to have stood still.

How much did the deaths of their father and brother influence the course of Juanita, Grace and Josephine’s lives? They were heiresses, yes, but that too might have been isolating.

Whatever the case, the sisters continued to render their mother practical and emotional support until her death on March 18, 1931. Only Juanita, the eldest daughter, would marry, and her union with Frank Seidel did not produce any children.

"In 1950 the partnership between the heirs of Lewis Moulton and the heirs of Jean Pierre Daguerre was dissolved and the ranch was physically divided. The Daguerre daughters' one-third of the 21,732-acre ranch was the portion now known as Laguna Niguel. The chain of title reveals that this portion was deeded to Eugene Shumaker on June 3, 1954. Grace and Josephine Daguerre spent their latter years in Laguna Beach. Juanita Daguerre Seidel, the oldest daughter and the last survivor, died in 1970. She had been a widow for many years and had made her home in South Laguna."

About this column: Every week, history buff and longtime Saddleback Valley resident Janet Whitcomb unearths another swashbuckling tale from when Lake Forest wasn't called Lake Forest.