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Living History Presentation

*The Machado Sisters:  
The Californianas of Old Town, San Diego*

William Heath Davis, an American land speculator and promoter of New Town, once wrote:

During my long and intimate acquaintance with Californians, I have found the women as a class much brighter, much quicker in their perceptions, and generally smarter than the men. Their husbands oftentimes looked to them for advice and direction in their general business affairs. As a rule they were not much educated; but they had abundant instinct and native talent,...<sup>1</sup>

The lives of the four Machado sisters featured in this month's living history dramatization tend to confirm Davis' observation. Juana de Dios (1814-1901), María Antonía Juliana (1815-1887), María Guadalupe (1819-1884), and Rosa María (1828-1893) were central and visible in the Old Town community. Living out the bulk of their lives around Washington Plaza, they maintained deep attachments to their families and to their Catholic faith. Two qualities stand out: They were steadfastly independent within the constraints of a rural, patriarchal society, and they established close relationships with blood kin and nonrelatives alike through a *compadrazgo* system of obligation and mutual respect.

The sisters were the descendants of hearty pioneer-soldier stock from Sinaloa in northwestern Mexico. Their father, José Manuel Machado, was a *soldado de cuero* (leather-jacket soldier), Spain's elite mounted dragoons, who was promoted to company corporal while stationed at the San Diego presidio. As repayment for his military service, he was granted a plot of land near the San Diego River below the presidio. Here he built several simple mud-block

adobe cottages to accommodate his ever-growing family. His wife María Serafina Valdez had thirteen children, including two who died in childbirth.

José's third daughter Juana left a rich account of her lengthy and active life in *Times Gone By in Alta California*, her "dictation" to Hubert Howe Bancroft's agent, Thomas Savage in 1878.<sup>2</sup> Her world, unlike ours, was close to nature, simple in its wants, limited in its human contact, respectful of authority, and steeped in a rich oral tradition of folklore and ritual. She and her sisters learned skills, like sewing, gardening, healing and nursing, that were essential to survival in a remote, largely self-sufficient frontier society. In later years, Juana became a *partera* or midwife, who was highly skilled in the use of native herbal remedies. She often traveled into the backcountry with Fr. Antonio Ubach to assist him in his missionary work among the Kumeyaay. And if he could not go, she went alone on horseback, carrying a glass decanter of holy water in case she had to administer the Last Rites.

Midwives like Juana used a pinch of snuff or pepper to induce vomiting and alleviate expulsive pain. They tied the umbilical cord with a silk thread, the raw end seared by candle flame and wrapped up in a scorched greasy rag. Post-natal care consisted of placing bundles of aromatic herbs atop fire-heated stones in a pit. Then, water was poured onto the rocks creating a great deal of steam, over which the recently delivered mother stood. Childbirth fever, so widespread in Europe, was virtually unknown in Alta California.

When Juana and her sisters grew up, there was no newspaper or school and very few books. They learned from elders by listening to and watching them. Ritual was a key aspect of this preliterate society. It brought people together; informed and guided their behavior and mores.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William Health Davis, *Seventy-Five Years in California* (San Francisco, 1967), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Wrightington, *Times Gone By in Alta California*, translated and annotated by Raymond S. Brandes (San Diego, 1958). See also, Judy Stacy, "A Study of the Life Style of Women in Old Town, with emphasis on Doña Juana Machado de Wrightington," (unpublished mss., nd), Old Town State Historic Park Archives; Raymond

Weddings, for instance, were splendid, community-wide affairs, complete with music, dancing and celebration. The announcement of the intended marriage was made public in the church at the mission three consecutive Sundays before the wedding day.

Juana's long life saw political control under three nations. The changing of the flag in 1822 from Spanish to Mexican rule left an indelible impression on her. Afterall, she was from a military family. She recounted the following to Savage:

The troops of infantry, cavalry and some few artillery were ordered to form in the Plaza of the Presidio – the cannons were put outside of the Plaza at the door of the guardroom, looking toward the sea. There was as yet no flag...When Commandant Ruiz...cried out “Long live the Mexican Empire!” the Spanish flag was lowered and the Mexican flag raised in the midst of salvos of artillerymen and musketeers...

On the following day an order was given to cut off the braids of the soldiers. This produced in everyone, men and women, a very disagreeable reaction. The former were accustomed to wear their hair long and braided with a knot of ribbon or silk at the end....I remember that when Papa came home with his braid in his hand and gave it to Mama, his face was very sad and that of mama no less so – She looked at the braid and wept.”<sup>3</sup>

On August 22, 1829, 15-year-old Juana married Damasio Alipás, a soldier at the presidio. He was later killed in 1835 during a skirmish with Indians in Mexico. On January 27, 1842, she married Thomas Wrightington, a one-eyed cooper from Fall River, Massachusetts. Having jumped ship some nine years earlier, Wrightington became a Catholic and a naturalized Mexican citizen. Now he took as his wife the 27-year old widow of one of the more respectable colonial families.

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Brandes, “Times Gone by in Alta California,” *Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly*, XLI, #3 (September, 1959), pp. 195-241.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Brandes, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

Yankee sailors and traders like Wrightington quickly gained control over the few entrepreneurial establishments in Old Town. The New Englander opened a *pulqueria* or grog shop. His one room adobe was soon doing a brisk business, selling liquors, bread, fruit, dry goods, and shoes. A favorite at the saloon was the centuries-old drink of the Americas called *pulque*, made from the *maguey* cactus plant. Wrightington served as justice of the peace and *alcalde* (or mayor), and during the American transition, he was elected sheriff and council member.

Acculturation though, was a two-way street. If Wrightington became a Catholic and a Mexican citizen, Juana learned English and her family gave the young couple a sound economic footing. During the war, Wrightington was an ardent supporter of the American side, and Juana probably nursed Americans wounded at the Battle of San Pasquel in the family home.

By mid-century much of Juana Wrightington's life was quickly unraveling. The American military occupied Old Town. American squatters, often with the support of their government, began to challenge the legitimacy of many Californio-held ranchos. And in 1853, Thomas Wrightington, her husband of eleven years, died while returning from his son-in-law's ranch, leaving the 39-year-old Juana a widow for the second time. But this indomitable woman persevered. A widow for the rest of her days, she raised her children, tended her gardens, ministered to the sick, delivered newborns, and assisted the Roman Catholic Church. In 1893, she successfully defended her deed of title in court.

María Antonia was born a year after Juana in the San Diego presidio. She married José Antonio Nacasio de Silvas, a soldier at the presidio, sometime during 1833-35. The newlyweds lived close to other Machado family members in a whitewashed adobe abutting Evans Street.

Similar to the Machado-Wrightington home, their house was L-shaped with a single wing on the west side.<sup>4</sup>

After retiring from soldiering, José Antonio moved to Rosario in Baja California to work on a rancho owned by the Machado family. María Antonia's life alternated between the family *rancho* in Rosario and her residence in Old Town. In due time, probably sometime between 1854 and 1855, she divorced her husband. She reportedly married Enos Wol (sometimes spelled Wall), a teamster from New York.

María Antonia continued to live in the Machado-Silvas home, which she renovated in order to open up a restaurant and later a saloon. The restaurant served beef steak, pork, mutton chops, oyster stew, and plenty of cakes, pies and coffee. By 1860, she had real property valued at \$2,000.

María Guadalupe was born on December 12, 1819. On July 8, 1847, she acquired a *huerta* or garden plot with an orchard fronting the Old Beach Road. On January 3, 1851, she complied with American law, and deeded the parcel to her American husband Albert Smith, a veteran of the Mexican War and teamster. Over the next several years, the couple built a single-story home with a shingled roof. A twelve-foot high adobe wall surrounded the residence.

Albert Smith committed suicide on April 11, 1867, and Ephraim Morse, a friend of the deceased, was appointed executor of his estate since American law prevented María Guadalupe from becoming guardian. Under his astute and principled counsel, Guadalupe retained all the property that she had owned before the marriage.

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<sup>4</sup> For information on María and the other sisters, see William Smythe, *History of San Diego* (1908), Vol. I; Maria Elena Mendoza, "The Machado Houses," (unpublished draft., 2001); Barbara Palmer, *Old Town San Diego Character Study* (2001), vol. II; Ray Brandes, *Preliminary Report on Old Town* (1974); Paul Ezell and Noel D. Broadbent, *Archaeological Investigations at the Casa de Jose Manuel Machado*, nd.; The Machado Vertical File, Old Town State Historic Park Archives.

The youngest of the Machado sisters, Rosa was born on November 15, 1828. She inherited a *cuarto* or room and a garden plot from her mother. Like her other sisters, she married an American in 1845, John “Jack” Stewart, a shipmate of the noted American author Richard Dana and a carpenter by trade from Hallowell, Maine.

The couple had eleven children. The family lived in the Machado-Stewart House off the Plaza. To accommodate the extended family, Jack and José Manuel added wings to the original two-room adobe. Renovations included adobe tile flooring, wood-frame window sills, roof rafters and sheathing boards.

Like other Americans who married into the Machado family, Jack fought on the United States’ side during the Mexican War. Known as *El Piloto*, he worked as a pilot at the New Town harbor, and later ran cattle.

The Machado sisters were enterprising Californianas who, in the words of historian Silvia Arrom, “were neither confined to the domestic sphere nor defined exclusively as wives and mothers.”<sup>5</sup> They owned property and ranchos,<sup>6</sup> filed for divorce, supervised the production and trade of cattle, hides, and other goods, manufactured foodstuffs, and tended family gardens. They were, in the words of historian Lisbeth Haas, “central and visible actors in the economy.”

Their sense of entitlement rested, in part, on the fact that Spanish and Mexican law gave them the right to control their property after marriage and to litigate on questions that related to their person, families, and holdings. They could conduct their own legal affairs, write their own wills without the consent of their husbands, and be guardians of their children and grandchildren

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<sup>5</sup> Silvia Marina Arrom, *The Women of Mexico City, 1790-1857* (Stanford, CA, 1985), pp. 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> Out of approximately 700 land grants during Mexican rule of Alta California (1821-1846), 55 were awarded to women. Single women and widows predominated among these original grantees, but many more women, like María Antonia Machado, shared title to a rancho with their brother or another male relative. See Gloria Ricci Lothrop, “Rancheras and the Land: Women and Property Rights in Hispanic California,” *Southern California Quarterly*, 76, #1 (Spring, 1994), p. 62.

after death of their spouses. As widows they inherited half the property and wealth accumulated during the marriage.<sup>7</sup>

Without these legal protections, none of the Machado women would have acquired or retained property, and without property, their public involvement beyond the domestic sphere would have been limited.

Californianas had to negotiate their positions through a minefield of double-standard traditions that rested on popular perceptions or misperceptions and caste distinctions and on distinctive grounds relative to Indian women – the *gente sin razón*. Mexican society identified women as either “decent” – virgins, nuns, ‘honest’ wives, and widows – or as “vile” – women whose sexual conducts placed them outside the protection of law when it came to defending their rights. A woman deemed vile could lose her right to child support or the inheritance she had gained from marriage.<sup>8</sup>

The Machado sisters exhibited a sense of entitlement to property derived from legal practices unfamiliar to many Anglo-Americans. Prior to 1850, American common law deprived married women of direct ownership of land in their own name. Most Anglo-American women saw control of their family’s land passed down from father to son. Unlike their Mexican counterparts, they could not conduct their own legal affairs, write their own wills, or act as guardian of a husband’s estate upon his death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley, 1995), esp. pp. 81-85.

<sup>8</sup> Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America, the Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven, 1984), passim.