
Before Cambria Was Cambria

Nestled among the pines at the junction of the coast road and Santa Rosa Creek, Cambria was blessed with plentiful lumber, a stunning coastline, fertile agricultural land, and hills rich with quicksilver. In this small corner of California's picturesque Central Coast, speculators would buy land, entrepreneurs would build a vibrant supply and service center, miners would come to relax and party after long hours in nearby mines, and dairymen would prosper.

Cambria citizens would be infected by mining fever when promising veins of quicksilver were discovered, mourn a fire that devastated their downtown, and work together to rescue the crew of a tanker torpedoed just off their coast. They would face disappointment when the railroad replaced shipping, and, again, when the highway to Hearst Castle detoured around their town. Instead, they participated in the building of an amazing castle and began to welcome visitors from around the world to San Luis Obispo County.

Today Cambria is a favorite locale in which to enjoy ocean sunsets, watch gifted artists work, wander through the lovely Victorian village, enjoy a great restaurant, and relax at one of its wonderful inns. It took Cambria years of trials and triumphs to acquire its unique place as one of California's most fascinating towns. Its story begins with local tribes, nearby missions, and two enormous land grants.

Local Tribes

Although our recorded history of the tribes in the region does not begin until the explorers and missionaries arrived, there is evidence that there were many tribal settlements in the area that was to become Cambria. It is estimated that as many as 30,000 Native Americans thrived in the San Luis Obispo area in the 1000 years before the Spaniards arrived.

Some experts believe that these tribes were migratory and used Cambria only as a seasonal settlement, while others are convinced that they lived there permanently. Most agree that they feasted on shellfish and seafood on the coast, in addition to traveling inland to hunt and gather seeds. A variety of their artistically crafted implements have been discovered, including obsidian spears and arrowheads; basalt, sandstone, and granite mortars and pestles; soapstone kettles; and stone hammers. Tribesmen were skilled basket and net makers and fashioned jewelry from crab claws, abalone shells, and the teeth of sharks and whales. The presence of soapstone (steatite) provides evidence that they traded with the Catalina Island tribes, as soapstone abounded there, while the lack of metals and glass indicates that they did not trade with Europeans or Asiatics.

One unfortunate footnote concerning our knowledge of the tribes who flourished in the Cambria area: In 1813, a Spanish law required the mission padres to record all the information they could gather about the pre-mission lives of local tribal members. Potentially a treasure trove of information, the mission padres recorded information colored by their perspective: They wrote that these tribes were slovenly, dirty, and unintelligent. Needless to say, this recorded information is of negligible value—and a wonderful opportunity to record and recapture tribal legends and mores was lost forever.

Despite these missionary records, enough evidence exists to allow experts to conclude that Cambria tribes were gentle, generous and peaceful, and that they lived simply. Their family bonds were strong and they exhibited great love and patience for their children. They were also noted for their extreme cleanliness in handling and preparing food and possessed an advanced knowledge of medicinal herbs. For entertainment, they enjoyed music and dance and had a passion for gambling.

Early Explorers

There is some evidence that a number of ships visited the area that would become Cambria. Some had drifted there on the Japanese or Alaskan currents. Others may have been Russian ships seeking otter.

The first recorded observations were provided in 1542 when **Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo** passed nearby on his fruitless search for a passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic. He recorded a deep indentation with a high, conical rock and named it "El Moro" (Morro Bay). Next he recorded a bay he called "Bay of Sardines," San Simeon Bay.

Although Cabrillo had claimed California for Spain in the 16th century, it was not until two centuries later that Spain began to exert control over the distant land. By that time, trade had become an important source of a nation's income, and it was evident that the country that controlled California's harbors would reap incredible profits. When England, France, and Russia began to covet California's coastline, Spain knew that it was time to assert its ownership.

The Spaniards planned to fortify the coast by building presidios (forts) and convert the natives by establishing missions. Before this could be accomplished, Spain needed to know more about this enormous, unexplored area. To gain first-hand information, an overland expedition of 67 men and 100 pack mules, led by **Gaspar de Portola**, left San Diego in 1769, heading for Monterey Bay. Progress was slow as the expedition had to wait for scouts to identify passable routes before proceeding.

This expedition provided a wealth of information. The recorder, **Father Juan Crespi**, gave us our first written description of the Cambria area and its local tribes. Camped at Santa Rosa Creek, near today's Coast Union High School, Crespi wrote:

. . . we discovered a mountainous region covered with pine and a canyon of great depth whose sides were thickly filled with trees. Pursuing our route (NNW) we encountered a large creek by whose banks we made a halt for the night, high above the canada. There came to visit us some 70 gentiles of a rancheria which was not far distant from us and they presented us with bowls of pinole for which we returned beads. They brought and offered us a bear cub, which they had bred up; but we refused it. From this circumstance, the soldiers took occasion to name the place Del Osito. I called it San Benvenuto.

The Portola Expedition also provided what some experts believe to be evidence that the local tribes were migratory: When journeying north in the summer, they encountered tribes inland. Upon their return in the winter, they found that the tribes had settled along the shore.

Spanish Mission Society

Soon after Portola's reports of a lovely land populated with friendly tribes, Spain began building presidios and missions. Four presidios were built, first in Monterey and San Diego, with Santa Barbara and San Francisco following. While they were being built, missions were established to convert the tribes and cultivate the land. Each mission was given control of all surrounding land to ensure there would be plenty of space for the converted natives, called neophytes, to master agrarian skills. Spain also expected that the missions would use their vast expanses of land, with their free neophyte labor, to achieve self-sufficiency.

Almost overnight, most of these missions prospered until they were far better provisioned and more powerful than any of the presidios. Dominating all land and most of the resources of California, this mission society soon became the major economic and political force in California. The Spanish king had hoped that, as soon as the neophytes had been converted and had adopted European habits and skills, the mission lands would be returned to them and the missions would cease to exist. He had not anticipated the incredible power of these missions, nor had he anticipated the intense Church resistance to dissolving them.

Several missions were soon built in the area, including Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa and Mission San Miguel de Archangel in the Salinas Valley. The closest of these missions, San Luis Obispo, had minimal impact on Cambria. Instead, it was the more distant mission at San Miguel that was granted control of the area.

Despite this lack of direct impact on Cambria, establishment of the mission in San Luis Obispo had a major significance to the area that was to become San Luis Obispo County. This mission, established

September 1, 1772, was immediately successful converting the tribes. Beginning with fewer than 10 neophytes, in just over a decade, 616 had been baptized there. As a result of these neophytes' hard manual labor, many structures were soon completed, including a church, a hospital, a schoolhouse, and a nunnery for females awaiting marriage. Land was cultivated and, within a few years, vineyards and gardens flourished, while cattle, sheep, and horses roamed the vast expanses of land.

Before long, Mission San Luis Obispo had emerged as one of California's most prosperous and powerful missions. According to Colton, in *Three Years in California*:

In 1821 the mission of San Luis Obispo had 78,000 cattle, 2000 tame horses, 3700 mules and 2700 sheep. One of the fathers of this mission took \$100,000 with him when he left for Spain in 1828.

Mission San Luis Obispo padres routinely participated in a favorite illegal coastal activity: smuggling. Spain had imposed heavy taxes on all foreign ships, but had neither the resources nor inclination to enforce collection of these taxes. The traders wanted the hides and tallow of the Mission and needed the produce that abounded on Mission lands to replenish their dwindling supplies. On the other hand, the padres needed the tools and equipment Spain had promised but had not delivered. Wearied by waiting years for promised provisions and with more cattle and produce than they could use, the padres gladly traded with the smugglers. Soon a flourishing system of illegal trade was bringing ships to the area routinely.

In addition to needed tools and equipment, this trade provided the Mission with a variety of supplies, such as handkerchiefs, clothes, tobacco, and trinkets for the neophytes; religious ornaments; musical instruments; and books from England and the East. Smuggler ships also brought luxury items from China, such as silk, dishes, furniture, and chests covered with the tooled and dyed hides that had recently been obtained from the missions. Before long, Mission San Luis Obispo had exquisite gold religious furnishings, embroidered cloth, and all the equipment and tools the padres needed.

In 1779, when the second mission in the area, Mission San Miguel, was being built, the padres journeyed to the Cambria area seeking beams for their chapel. The cedar and pine from its forests were perfect, and neophytes from Mission San Miguel cleared a cart trail between San Miguel and San Simeon. Not only did the padres get the beams they needed, they also decided that they wanted to control this lovely land. They petitioned Spain for it, saying they needed more grazing land. In reality, they also wanted it so that they would have coastal access and could participate in the lucrative smuggling that had enriched Mission San Luis Obispo.

Their petition was granted, and Mission San Miguel soon controlled an enormous amount of land, including today's San Simeon and Cambria. Although the Mission radically changed the tribesmen's lives in the Salinas Valley, the impact on the tribes in Cambria was minimal. The padres' plan was to convert all local tribes before recruiting converts from outlying areas, such as Cambria. Before they were able to journey to Cambria to begin this conversion, Mexico had gained possession and the mission system was dismantled.

Although Cambria tribes were never the focus of conversion activities, they were impacted slightly when Mission neophytes journeyed to the Cambria area to supplement their food supply with shellfish and seafood and to retrieve cattle and sheep that had wandered there. As trails began to bring padres and neophytes to the Cambria area, local tribes moved into the hills. Later, as Mexicans began to ranch the land, followed by settlers, these tribes moved farther and farther inland.

Despite its control of an enormous amount of land, Mission San Miguel was never as prosperous as Mission San Luis Obispo. Where everything seemed to flourish in San Luis Obispo, the padres at San Miguel could not get their land to produce the fabulous fruits and vegetables growing in San Luis Obispo. So poor was their production that it is likely that, if the Mission San Luis Obispo padres had not given them food, there would have been seasons of extreme hunger and even starvation at San Miguel.

Mission Decline and Secularization

Mission San Luis Obispo caught fire three times and was attacked by the inland Tulare tribe. The fires and attack, although upsetting and causing damage that required hundreds of hours of neophyte labor to repair, did not significantly contribute to the Mission's decline. Rather, the cycle of disease and death among neophytes throughout California foretold the demise of the entire mission system. Without healthy neophytes able to do hard manual labor, missions could not survive.

In the early decades of the 19th century, those with foresight recognized that the neophytes were not thriving in the missions. Exposed to illness introduced by Russian otter hunters, the Spanish, and the continuous parade of smugglers, neophyte deaths increased, and birth rates plummeted. Although it took Mexico's victory over Spain and the secularization of all land to end the era of mission domination, the tragic decline of California tribes spelled the inevitable demise of this powerful institution.

When it became clear that Mexico was winning its war for independence from Spain and would soon own California, many wondered what changes Mexico would impose. Although Mexico won its independence and took possession of California in 1821, it was not until 1833 that the Mexican Congress had adopted a *Decree of Secularization*. This decree mandated that all missions be converted to parish churches and that the vast mission resources, except the church itself, be transferred to the government. Throughout California, padres were removed and replaced by curates. Although some vehemently opposed this decree, others, who had chafed under the unfairness of a society that had given the Church all the land, resources, and power, cheered the arrival of the Mexicans and the end of the mission system.

The huge tracts of land comprising the missions were dispersed. Although neophytes were given land, grain, cattle, and equipment, few were successful achieving self-sufficiency. Instead, most either sold their land or were cheated out of it and, before long, were either working for or had joined the Tulare tribe. During this transition,

much that had been developed under the mission system disappeared. Before long, Mission San Miguel lay in ruins, Mission San Luis Obispo had been sold, huge herds ran wild, cultivated lands reverted to nature, and equipment had been stolen or left to rot.

Mexican Ranchos

As the missions were being dismantled, Mexicans saw a golden opportunity to acquire land, and many petitioned for it. Before long, huge tracts of land throughout California were awarded to loyal Mexican soldiers and citizens. Almost immediately, the power in California shifted from the padres to the rancheros (ranch owners) who had been given these land grants. Two who had proven their loyalty to the Mexican government, **Jose de Jesus Pico** and **Juliano Estrada**, were awarded land grants in the Cambria area.

In 1840, Jose de Jesus Pico, the cousin of the last Mexican governor, **Pio Pico**, was rewarded for his help overthrowing Spanish rule with an enormous land grant, the largest allowable under Mexican law. Named Rancho de la Piedra Blanca after the impressive rocks painted white by its huge bird population, it spanned 48,805 acres or 136 square miles, and included 14 miles of coastline extending from south of San Simeon to Ragged Point. As required by law, Pico built a dwelling, cultivated the land, and stocked it with animals. Having met the requirements, he left the rancho and only visited twice a year.

Instead, Pico took an active role in the political maneuverings that typified the era of Mexican rule. When he did come to the rancho, it was to participate in the activities that characterized this unique era, remembered as "Old California": roundups and matanzas (slaughterings) replete with vaqueros (cowboys), enormous amounts of food, gambling, horse racing, and, most important, wonderful music and dancing.

The era of Mexican rule was short-lived and, by the mid-1840s, it was clear to all that the United States would soon own California. Although savvy enough not to oppose the imminent American takeover, Pico was implicated in an 1846 conspiracy involving

allegedly treasonable dispatches. He was arrested by **John C. Fremont** and sentenced to death at sunrise the next morning. According to one account, while Pico was awaiting death, his wife enlisted the help of her friends. These women came with their children, including all 14 of Pico's, begging, crying, praying, and wailing for his life to be spared. Wisely, the Americans released him. They knew he was less dangerous to them alive than as a martyred hero. They were right, and Pico soon became a positive political force in the new American territory, working successfully with Fremont.

Like Pico's Rancho de la Piedra Blanca, the other large land grant in the area, encompassing the Cambria area, was blessed with abundant water and wildlife. When Mexico began giving away land, this rich rancho was coveted. In 1838, Juliano Estrada petitioned the Governor for it and, by 1841, he had been officially awarded the 13,184-acre land grant called Rancho Santa Rosa. Like Pico, Estrada built his adobe and left it in the care of family members. Unlike Pico, by 1849, Estrada had brought his family to settle there. During the next decade, despite the daily hardships of life in a primitive land, he and his family basked in the Old California lifestyle of fancy clothes, fine horses and saddles, lavish barbecues, and frequent fiestas, with music and dancing.

In addition to these two enormous ranchos, in 1842, another **Estrada, Jose Ramon**, was granted almost 4500 acres wedged between Rancho de la Piedra Blanca and San Simeon Creek. Called Rancho San Simeon, Estrada sold it shortly before his death in 1845. Subsequently sold five times between 1845 and 1867, the rancho was eventually acquired by the Van Gordens, who became one of Cambria's important founding families.

Although these rancheros attempted to gain self-sufficiency by producing much of what they needed, they also enjoyed the extravagant clothing, jewelry, and saddles they acquired from smuggling. Under Spanish rule, all foreign ships had been heavily taxed. Under Mexican rule, laws were even more restrictive, and all trade with foreign ships was illegal. Although Spain could not enforce its taxation laws, Mexico was even less successful at excluding foreign ships from California's shores. Soon, the smuggling that had been

prevalent in Spanish times became the dominant economic force under Mexican rule. Rancheros obtained everything they could not produce for themselves by trading hides, tallow, and produce to the grateful smugglers.

This lucrative trade allowed Pico and Estrada to barter their otherwise nearly valueless cattle for the extravagant clothing, jewelry, and fancy saddles they so loved. This trade also allowed them to indulge in their resplendent fiestas and lavish lifestyles. For those who participated in this festive and genteel world, it was a very good time and is remembered fondly. Despite the pleasantries of these days, Pico and Estrada knew that Mexico would not be able to control the promise-filled land for long. They knew it was only a matter of time before the United States would reach West for California. While they continued to party, they watched and they waited for the inevitable changes.

California Gold Rush

When America gained possession of California in 1846 through the *Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo* that concluded the Mexican-American War, Pico and Estrada were not alone in wondering what changes the new government would bring. Accustomed to the neglect and disorganization of the Mexican government that had allowed them to function independently, many watched the Americans with concern.

At first, life under United States ownership improved significantly for Mexican rancheros. Cattle, initially valued only for hides and tallow, became an essential food source when gold was found in California in 1849. California's population skyrocketed during the Gold Rush, and gold-seeking prospectors were willing to pay dearly for the beef they craved. Almost overnight, the moderately lucrative hide and tallow trade was transformed into an extremely lucrative beef trade. Huge herds were driven to San Francisco, and wealth poured into the pockets of the rancheros.

The Gold Rush ushered in an era marked by prosperity (for the rancheros) and even more frequent genteel parties and lavish fiestas. Celebrants from neighboring ranchos arrived dressed in resplendent clothes and sporting elegant jewels and saddles. For just over a decade after the American takeover, life was very good for these Mexican land grantees, who continued to dominate the financial and social life of California. Although technically owned by America, life was much as it had been under Mexican rule, except that the good life was even better.

Breakup of the Ranchos

Changes began for the Mexican land grantees when, in the late 1850s, each rancho was required to prove that they legally owned his rancho. This proof required a survey confirming the original survey and, usually, legal help to file petitions. To their horror, surveyors and lawyers demanded cash. Known for lavish and generous spending, most rancheros used a barter system and simply did not have the cash required. Many were forced to borrow money to pay these fees.

When the survey of Rancho Santa Rosa was complete in 1858, Estrada learned that his rancho spanned 13,184 acres. He also learned that he owed \$7900 for this survey and legal fees. He agreed to the loan offered by a young, handsome, wealthy lawyer who had recently emigrated from Spain to California, **Domingo Pujol**. This loan required a 2% compounded monthly interest rate that translated to a whopping 27% per year. As he had no way to pay the debt and had used his entire rancho as collateral for the loan, foreclosure proceedings began within nine months. When it was over eight years later, Estrada held only the 1500 acres that surrounded his home, while Pujol owned the rest of the huge rancho.

On top of the devastating fees, in 1863, the first of a series of severe droughts swept the region. Cattle by the thousands congregated around disappearing creeks and slowly perished from starvation. The land had become so dry that grass simply could not grow. When it was clear to Pico that there was no hope for his cattle, he killed them

by driving them off a cliff as a kinder alternative to the slow starvation they were destined to suffer. After three successive drought seasons, leaving the land strewn with dead cattle, it was clear that the days of the large, prosperous ranchos had ended. By the time the rains came back, only a few cattle had survived. The enormous losses resulting from the death of their cattle, combined with high survey and legal debts, resulted in the breakup of these huge land grants. Pico and Estrada watched stoically as their lavish life of comfort, respectability, influence, and affluence disappeared forever.

By 1866, both Estrada and Pico, despite having proven their legal ownership of their ranchos, had lost them. When this happened, the best land on California's Central Coast was suddenly available to anyone with vision and money. The breakup of these two huge ranchos, plus the earlier sale in 1845 of Rancho San Simeon, provided the opportunity for ranchers, entrepreneurs, and speculators to buy land—and heralded the birth of Cambria.

Arrival of the Hearsts

George Hearst had both the vision and the money to take advantage of the breakup of these ranchos. Hearst had been born in Missouri in 1820 to farmers, and had decided early that farming was too hard and not profitable enough. By 1850, he had joined the California Gold Rush. He prospected unsuccessfully for the next 10 years, until he hit a bonanza in 1859 by buying a one-sixth interest in the Ophir silver mine, part of the rich Comstock Lode. After this windfall, this mining genius successfully invested in a variety of silver, gold, and copper mines.

By the time his only child, **William Randolph**, was born in 1863, Hearst had also developed an interest in real estate. He found the perfect combination of these interests, land, and potentially valuable mines, when he discovered the San Simeon region. Not only did he envision San Simeon Bay as an important port, he was also intrigued by the discovery of quicksilver in the area. He moved quickly to acquire all the available land and to develop the lovely bay.

He had competition for this land, as he was not the first to settle in the San Simeon area. When he came in 1865 and began buying Pico's Rancho de la Piedra Blanca, 17,000 acres of the rancho had already been sold to settlers. Other settlers had begun ranching on public domain land they had purchased for \$1.25 an acre, while yet another group had illegally squatted on portions of the rancho. Hearst's first step toward acquiring San Simeon was to purchase 30,000 acres of Rancho de la Piedra Blanca. He then began a decades-long tradition of buying plots whenever they became available until he and his family had amassed much of San Simeon.

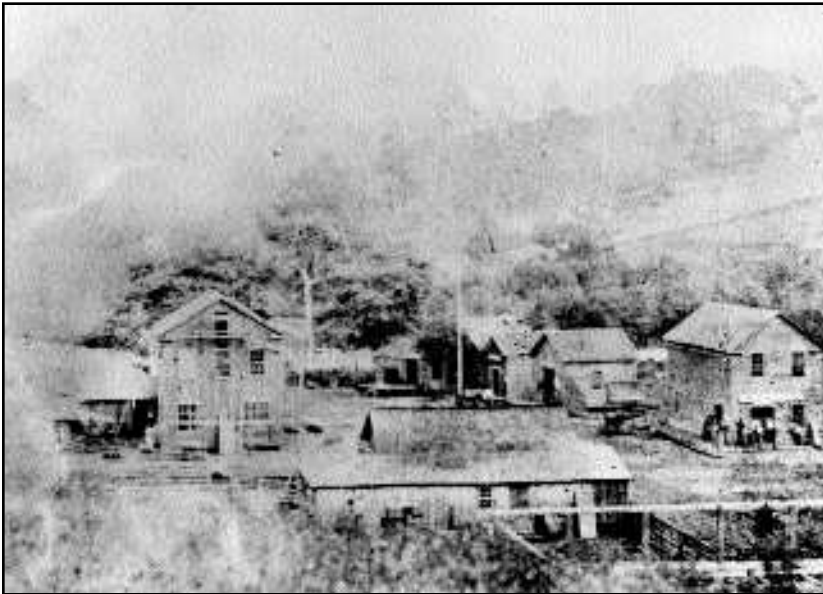
Hearst also began to strategize the acquisition of surrounding land. He wanted to buy the land at the junction of the trails along Santa Rosa Creek and the coast, the future location of Cambria. This land, part of Estrada's Santa Rosa Rancho, was not for sale, as Pujol was in the process of repossessing it. Nevertheless, while Pujol was foreclosing on Rancho Santa Rosa, George Hearst purchased it from Estrada in an amazingly good deal – \$3000. The deed gave Hearst 13,024 acres and left 160 acres for Estrada.

Unfortunately for Hearst, Estrada did not have the right to sell this land, and Hearst did not discover this until the deed had been recorded and the money paid. After three trips to court, he realized that he would not win and walked away with nothing. When Pujol's repossession was complete and Estrada was left with only 1500 acres, he sold 1340 of these acres to Hearst. In the space of a few years, Estrada's holdings had shrunk from 13,184 acres to a mere 160 acres, while Hearst's and Pujol's had grown enormously.

When Estrada died in 1871, his 17 year old son, **Francisco "Poncho"**, took over the management of his remaining 160 acres and provided a home for his mother and siblings. When they left in 1876, they sold their 160 acres to Hearst who then hired "Poncho" who worked on Hearst's San Simeon ranch the rest of his life. Estrada's adobe was torn down by the Hearsts, but when Highway 1 was widened, residents of Cambria salvaged a number of artifacts from the ruins of his old adobe, including pottery, a candleholder, and some roof tiles.

In 1866, as soon as the title to Santa Rosa Rancho had been cleared and Pujol owned the land, he divided it up and offered it for sale. **John Myers** and **William Gillespie** were his first customers. They bought 195 acres north of Cambria. Not surprisingly, Hearst was also one of Pujol's early customers. By 1868, Hearst had bought a number of Pujol's plots, until he owned 3000 acres of the original Rancho Santa Rosa, in addition to his San Simeon holdings.

The breakup of these two ranchos spurred the arrival of settlers and entrepreneurs, and set the stage for the establishment of Cambria. Before Cambria was Cambria, it was the home to local tribes, part of the enormous Mission San Miguel lands, awarded as a Mexican land grant, and was actively sought by many when it was dissolved. Once ruled by Spain and Mexico, it was now part of a new American state and on the verge of becoming a vibrant and hopeful new town.



Early Cambria, known as 'Slab Town'