



Dr. Willella Howe in mid-1886

Love, marriage & families

by Jerry Hicks



Dr. Willella Howe in her later years





Dr. Alvin Jared Howe



We cull the annals of local history to find three stories of commitment, tragedy and triumph

By hardscrabble path on horseback and mule, across deserts and mountains in bitter winter cold with little water, 1,200 miles over five months to a land unknown and almost unimaginable. What a journey for the motley parade of 240 populists who became the first civilian settlement in California in 1776. Just seven years before, Spanish soldiers and priests, led by Baja Governor Gaspar de Portola, had moved up the peninsula to establish the new territory's first presidios and missions, from San Diego to Monterey. Now Lieutenant Colonel Juan Bautista de Anza was bringing more soldiers, plus women and children, to populate California, embarking from Sonora, Mexico, what is today's Arizona.

Among the Anza travelers were two young sisters, 9-year-old Maria Josefa Grijalva and 4-year-old Maria del Carmen Grijalva. Their father, Sergeant Juan Pablo Grijalva, had been serving in the presidio in Terrenate, Sonora, when Anza's sergeant for the California expedition became ill and had to drop out. Grijalva, asked to take his place as third-in-command, uprooted his wife, Dolores, and their two little girls for an adventure on what became known as the El Camino del Diablo—the Road of the Devil.

"Can you just picture what these little girls must have thought?" says Eddie Grijalva, a long-time Orange County resident who has made a passionate study of that Anza trip. "Their father was taking them from the only home they'd ever known, to head for ... for what? They didn't know. Nobody on that expedition knew what was ahead, what their futures would be."

THE YORBAS AND THE PERALTAS

Little could 4-year-old Carmen know that one day she would marry one of the feisty young boys she met on that trek, a lad with his own military future. Nor could Josefa know that she would one day marry one of the soldiers from that historic Portola expedition.

The eventual weddings of these two young Anza survivors led to the first two family dynasties of what would become Orange County—the Yorbas and the Peraltas. The descendants from the two girls' marriages now number in the thousands.

Eddie Grijalva was not a direct descendant of Juan Pablo Grijalva or his two daughters. But because their families were the first Europeans to make a home in what became Orange County, he became so obsessed with the Anza expedition, he once took a vacation trip to re-trace the Anza path.

not quite 15 when he asked her to marry him. By contrast, Jose Antonio Yorba, a widower, was more than twice Josefa's age when he asked her to be his bride. Both couples married at nearby Mission Delores, which their families had helped build. The Yorba-Grijalva marriage came in 1882, the Peralta-Grijalva marriage three years later.

Eddie Grijalva is convinced that the sergeant father was closer to Carmen's husband than to Yorba. When the Peraltas had a son, they named him Juan Pablo, after the sergeant. Juan Pablo Grijalva moved with his wife to the presidio in San Diego in 1786, and eventually that beloved Peralta grandson, as a young man, would join them. A few years later, Jose Antonio Yorba was granted a military transfer to San Diego, too. By then he and Josefa had a growing family.

Upon his military retirement in 1796,

women of that era. But a 1932 Orange County Historical Society book notes that generations of Yorbas up to then identified Josefa as "a woman of high ideals and great strength of character." Much of that may have been based on one documented action she took.

When Jose Antonio Yorba died in 1825, he left his estate—as was custom in the Old World—to his wife and four sons. But Josefa, her backbone perhaps toughened as a child along the road with Anza, re-petitioned the government after his death to have the will changed so that the six surviving daughters were also included in the division of land. Josefa died five years after her husband.

More land grants were handed out by the government over the years, divided between the Peraltas and the Yorbas. The original Yorbas would have had more than 60 grandchildren. Peralta and his wife had

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—Diana Robles, a descendant of Jose Antonio Yorba and Josefa Grijalva

"At one point I got out of the car and looked around; it was just desert as far as you could see in any direction," he recalls. "There was just nothing there. Nothing. It makes you think what those people on that expedition must have endured."

February is that month when thoughts turn to love and valentines. Orange County's history is rich with great love stories. But we are seldom told about the two little girls who trusted their parents to make a home for them in this new California. Their love stories will always remain a mystery to us.

The Grijalva family settled at the presidio in San Francisco, where the father was one of its top military leaders. The Peralta family from the Anza trip settled there, too. Pedro Regaldo Peralta was 14 during Anza, more Josefa's age than Carmen's. How much attention would he have given a 4-year-old on such a difficult five-month journey? But his attention must have grown with time. Carmen was

Juan Pablo Grijalva sought the land that he had been promised when he first left Sonora, Mexico. Eventually, he was granted permission to take over 74,000 acres just east of Mission San Juan Capistrano. So he and his wife, joined by their young Peralta grandson, built the first adobe home in Orange County, near today's Villa Park, not far from Santiago Creek. At some point, his daughter Josefa and her husband joined them. But Juan Pablo Grijalva died in 1806, before receiving clear title to his land. Yorba then had to re-petition for the land for himself and young Peralta. Juan Pablo Peralta had been married two years before to Ana Gertrudes Arce. It was granted only on condition that Juan Pablo Grijalva's widow approved it, which she did. That petition shows there were already three adobes on the land, a strong indication that the Yorba/Peralta/Grijalva cattle rancho was already active.

There is little in the records about

nine children of their own, and just as many grandchildren. As you might expect, the two family factions didn't always get along; some of the land disputes had to be decided in the courts. And as their family trees spread out to the thousands, the land was divided into smaller parcels and eventually all sold. But for both the Yorba and Peralta descendants, their history is rich and vivid to them.

Diana Robles, a direct descendant of Jose Antonio and Josefa who now lives in Buena Park, calls it a source of great pride that her family helped start what Orange County now has. But like others, she has wondered over the years how things would have turned out had Juan Pablo Grijalva not taken a chance by uprooting his wife and two daughters for the great move to California.

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THE BIXBY-BRYANTS

There is a picture from the early 1930s at the Yorba Linda Historical Society's building on the old Bixby-Bryant ranch grounds that shows a very proper and well-dressed Dr. Ernest A. Bryant holding a baby in his arms, a wide grin on his face. Gazing at him with a glowing smile, surrounded by numerous other people, is a stunningly attractive woman: his wife, Susanna Bixby-Bryant. The child her husband is holding is their grandson, Edward A. Bryant III.

"Eddie came to talk to our group once," recalls Jo Ann Ardanaz, president of the Yorba Linda Historical Society. "He had only glowing things to say about his grandparents. Yes, theirs was a wonderful marriage."

Though their first meeting isn't really known, they traveled the same circles. The doctor was one of the most sought after bachelors in the area. Susanna was a daughter of one of the richest men in California, John Bixby, who owned much of today's Long Beach and north Orange County. She was raised in a great mission home—today a major tourist attraction at the old Rancho Los Alamitos in Long Beach. It had once been an adobe built by the son of the first Spanish landowner of Southern California and passed through three owners before John Bixby took it over in 1878. The Bixby family lived there the next 90 years. John Bixby died abruptly of appendicitis in 1887, when he was just 39 years old. His son Fred took over most of that ranch, and his daughter, Susanna, just a child when he died, eventually took over the entire ranch the family owned in today's Yorba Linda area.

Though she and her doctor husband, who had two children, were part of high society in Pasadena, Susanna, was a hands-on owner of the ranch 40 miles away. In 1911, she began building workhouses and took control of the ranch. In 1924, she built a magnificent hillside home there. Schoolchildren who saw it on the hillside from their bus called it the Bryant Castle. It was a huge, three-story

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Mission-style home with walls more than 4 feet thick, considered the best in the county. The crowning point was a tower that gave the family a rare view from that distance of the Pacific Ocean. She used it not just as a home but as a test center for many of the plants on the property.

Bixby-Bryant shared her father's passionate interest in native plants of California. As a tribute to her father, she established Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in 1927, and at more than 100 acres, it was the state's largest botanical garden devoted only to native plants.

"They lived in that house but also maintained their residence in Pasadena," Ardanaz says. "We've had plenty of people come through here talking about great parties there, and how much Susanna and her husband were loved."

Eddie Castro, who now lives in Yorba Linda, says the Bryants were known as a loving couple. But it was Susanna who cared most about the land. In 1938, a few years after her husband died, she threw a huge party for the children of all the workers at the ranch—53 children in all. Castro was one of them.

"I remember this walk-in fireplace," he remembers fondly. "It was so big, they had a whole tree stump burning in it."

The living room, he says, could hold a party of 50 people with ease. But what he recalls the most is his chance to climb that tower.

"Susanna Bixby-Bryant was one of those kind of people that when she'd be driven through the ranch in her car, she'd have the driver stop so she could wave to the children each time," he says. "She was really something special."

Not long after she died in 1946, the garden's plants were moved to Claremont, where her work is still carried on today. In

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the late 1950s, the old mansion had to be torn down when it fell into disrepair. But still remaining today is the ranch superintendent's home, on what is now Susanna Bryant Road. The local historical society headquarters is there, and it presents tours each Sunday. Mainly what it does is help keep Susanna Bixby-Bryant's name before the public.

THE HOWES

Theirs was one of the great loves of Orange County. And also one of the saddest of divorces. We can only guess how small town scandal affected the marriage of two of Santa Ana's most

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prominent doctors, Alvin Howe and his wife, Willella.

Just across the street from the Old County Courthouse in Santa Ana sits the Howe-Waffle House, a two-and-a-half story Queen Anne mansion (moved from its original site). It's the home that Willella Howe, the county's first woman doctor, shared with her first husband, Alvin, and then later with her second husband, Edson Waffle, a local livery stable owner and businessman. It's now home to the Santa Ana Historical Society.

The son of a doctor, Alvin Howe graduated from the Medical College of the Pacific in 1873 and married Willella Earhart the next year, just three days before Christmas. They had much in common, according to researcher Danielle Ball (whose work is recommended by the Santa Ana Historical Society). Writes Ball, "Both were born in the East, then spent several years in the Midwest before enduring the grueling and dangerous three-month trek by wagon train to northern California."

A year later, their first daughter, Lulu, was born. That same year, the Howes moved from San Francisco to Westminster, where Alvin established a country doctor practice. The next year, a second daughter, Ethel, was born.

Alvin left Westminster in 1880 to broaden his medical education in Chicago but returned the next year to set up a practice in Santa Ana. Willella by that time was teaching school. They were leading citizens. He donated time to the Masons and the Odd Fellows, she was active with the Women's Christian Temperance Union. But Willella Howe also wanted to be a doctor.

Diann Marsh, an Orange County historian considered the foremost authority on Santa Ana, believes that Willella's desire for a medical degree stemmed from her seeing a need for better medical care for women. Whatever her motivation, all indications are that her husband strongly supported her decision, and even cooperated when she wanted to take their younger daughter, still a toddler, with her to medical school in Chicago, the same school where he had enhanced his medical education.

She returned with her medical degree in 1886, the same year Santa Ana became

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an incorporated city. By the next year, the city was booming in growth, thanks in great part to a recent flood leaving a strong water table in the area for good plant growth, plus the growing popularity of the railroad.

As Ball writes, "The Howes were poised on the edge of greatness."

In 1887, the Howes bought a lot at the corner of Bush and Seventh streets, and hired an architect to build their two-and-a-half story, 12-room, Queen Anne-style home for both a residence and their medical offices. It took two years to build.

In 1888, Alvin won a seat on the city's board of trustees and later was elected as Santa Ana's second mayor. The next year, Orange County was created, carved out of Los Angeles County. And the year after that, the Howes' marriage turned to gloom.

No longer mayor in 1890, Alvin found himself the target of a grand jury indictment. The charge: That he performed an abortion for a young married woman whose husband was working back in Wisconsin. Abortion is great cause for debate today; in that era, it was an unpardonable sin. Alvin became one of the first occupants of the new Orange County Jail (just behind the Old County Courthouse). He was released on bail, then answered the charges at a hearing.

The myth continues today that Alvin was acquitted at a trial. Actually, the case was dismissed by the judge after the alleged victim took the Fifth Amendment at the hearing, and the local prosecutor, who never agreed with the grand jury indictment, asked for a dismissal.

Was he guilty? It's been assumed so over the years. Did his wife support what he may have done. We can assume so. She certainly stood by him during that travail.

Alvin had won in court, but the case was a blow to his reputation—and to his spirit. He immediately moved back to San Francisco and began a medical practice there. But that wasn't the end of the marriage. Local newspaper society pages would report periodic visits by Alvin to the family residence. And in 1894, the local Santa Ana paper announced: "Dr. A.J. Howe was expected to arrive today from San Francisco to resume his medical practice."

But it was short-lived. Just a few months after his first daughter's graduation from high school, he moved back to San Francisco for good. In 1897, Willella filed for divorce, citing abandonment two years before. She'd finally given up that he would return again.

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—Diann Marsh,
Orange County historian

Santa Ana historian Marsh believes it was during this time that Willella became a giant among pioneers.

"She held her head high and continued her thriving practice, remained active in her church, and never let the rumors and street talk get to her," Marsh says. "She delivered more babies than any other doctor in the county, more than 1,000. They were known as Waffle babies."

For soon after her divorce, she married Edson Waffle, who had numerous business interests in town. She became Willella Howe-Waffle. Alvin died in the San Francisco area in 1905. He never remarried. Willella died at the age of 70, in 1920, at a patient's bedside.

The Howe-Waffle House was set to be destroyed a few decades back, but historic-minded citizens in Santa Ana saved the day.

"Yes, it was probably one of Orange County's great marriages," Marsh says of the Howes. "But it ended tragically. The real story to me is how Willella bounced back from that tragedy. She was a true hero of this county." **OC**

—Jerry Hicks is an Orange Coast contributing editor.