

LAS FLORES RANCH HOUSE HISTORY

Interviews with Magee Family Descendants

Date of Interview: May 21, 1996

Place of Interview: Patio at Las Flores Ranch House

Interviewer: Corporal Nicholson

Transcriber: Dee Morning

Nicholson: Welcome back to Las Flores. Please tell us your name and tell us when you first came here.

Stauss: My name is Jane Pedrorena Magee Stauss and I came here October 31, 1919.

Nicholson: You were born here.

Stauss: I was born right here in the front bedroom, through the foyer and to the right.

Nicholson: Was your mother living here at the time?

Stauss: No, she was living in San Juan Capistrano. They didn't have doctors there and they had a family doctor here, from Oceanside, Doctor Reid, and like they all say, "He borned me".

Nicholson: Did your father come along too?

Stauss: Oh yes.

Nicholson: Who else was here when you were born?

Stauss: Aunt Jane, and everybody. This was not a home, this was a family hotel, sisters, brothers, in-laws, outlaws, what ever.

Nicholson: Did you live here then?

Stauss: No, but I spent a great deal of my life here. Weeks at a time if my family had to go someplace, if there was illness. We liked it here, we loved coming here.

Nicholson: What do you remember about growing up here?

Stauss: That they were very formal people. When the dinner bell rang you were at that table for prayer immediately. They weren't clannish but they were careful. You felt very warm and very wonderful. You didn't have a preference, you loved them all. And for children that had been raised by an older sister and an older brother that was wonderful. They were all educated, they went to college. They were very proud people.

Nicholson: Who took care of you when you were here?

Stauss: Aunt Jane was the major domo. She told you what to do. I have to laugh; my Aunt Jane didn't want to tell my cousin May Jo all the time to wash her hands so she'd tell me in Spanish to tell her to do it.

We had my engagement party here. All along this corridor the tables were set up. All the relatives came. I was married in 1938. My daughter was born at the end of that year. I was here before she was born, and brought her back here from the hospital after she was born.

Nicholson: Describe that engagement party was it decorated?

Stauss: Oh yes, my mother was very clever. First of all when you came to Las Flores you could hear the windmill squeaking. Then you would hear hundreds of blackbirds. You knew you had arrived at Las Flores. You came through the gate, it was a terrible gate, never really did work well. There was another hedge here; it was just gorgeous, all beautiful flowers. Tables were set up along this corridor. All my relatives were here and also Ed Ainsworth of the Los Angeles Times, a historian by the way. He's written many California books.

Nicholson: Where did you get married?

Stauss: In the Capistrano Mission Chapel.

Nicholson: What is your most vivid memory of Las Flores as a child?

Stauss: The thing that impressed me most was when you would lose a family member and how it would affect the rest. The flowers were always here on the lawn and the

services in Oceanside. That affected me most, losing a family member, because they were a close-knit family.

Nicholson: What did the day go like when that happened?

Stauss: One of the cousins, a Wolfskill had been a florist and he would come and set up the flowers here. There was no florist in Oceanside in those days. And the family was very sad, there was a lot of consoling, a lot of sorrow. It was very difficult for the family; you hated to see the family suffer.

Nicholson: Was there a bell here?

Stauss: Oh, there was a wonderful bell – right over there. It wasn't a very big bell (holds hands about 18" apart) and it had its own belfry. That was really the dinner bell, but if you had a problem, or if somebody was home alone and you needed the workmen to come in, someone to come and help, you'd ring that bell. I guess all ranches had one; we did at our ranch up in the mountains.

Nicholson: Was it used at funerals?

Stauss: I don't remember that, but it was used if you needed to call the family together in a hurry. There was so much love and respect in that family, for their friends and for each other – and there was always room for another kid!

Nicholson: Did you have a favorite relative?

Stauss: No, well we favored the younger sister because she was so petite. The family was almost like two families, the older ones and then the three younger ones; my dad, my Uncle Louie and my Auntie Bea. They were the three little ones so I guess everyone favored her because she was the youngest. That would be the only reason I think.

But none of them were housewives, they were politically oriented and business oriented. May Jo's grandmother was so political. I mean she did something about it – women's suffrage, all the time. Her husband was State Senator and he said he'd probably get booted out for voting with her. They were very strong people.

And my Aunt Jane fed every bum that came through. Once one called her sister and she replied, "I am not your sister!" They (the bums) hung something on the barbed wire fence that said this is the place to stop. She was feeding more bums than the people that worked for her. She was a fabulous lady.

Nicholson: How many people were working for her?

Stauss: Oh I don't know. When you were harvesting with mules it took so many people to take care of your livestock. There was another huge barn back here and a smaller one (there) and then the Boy Scouts built one, but it isn't a working barn. It was beautiful, I'm sorry it looks like this.

Nicholson: Who held the lease?

Stauss: Aunt Jane. Did you know the story about (President) Roosevelt coming to see Aunt Jane because she was too ill to go to the Santa Margarita Ranch House so he came here? Right here in the living room and he said, "Miss Jane you may stay on this ranch as long as anyone in your generation is living." When she passed away, my Uncle Louie took it over and then my husband came out and worked with him for quite a while.

Nicholson: Uncle Louie was married to whom?

Stauss: He was married to his first cousin, Ruth Wolfskill and they didn't have any children. There was a huge warehouse up on the highway and one day I was up there with him and he said, "You know, it would take all the water in the Pacific Ocean to cook all these beans." You can't imagine how many beans there were. He worked two times a year. He planted, and he was not a big robust man but he wore his little bandana and his little jean outfit, he was adorable. He'd always come in for teatime in the afternoon and then he'd go back to work. Anyway, he did all the planting. And then he'd run the warehouse and it had to be just so. Those bags had to be lined up just so.

Nicholson: What was the company name on those lima beans?

Stauss: Magee. I think it was Jane Magee as a matter of fact. And they used to call her the Bean Queen. Jane Magee, the Bean Queen. You know with about 2000 acres of lima beans, why not?

Nicholson: What are your impressions today of this location and the Santa Margarita Ranch? You've visited both today.

Stauss: I think Santa Margarita is absolutely gorgeous and it really touched my heart. I'm sure it would anyone's. I think this is very sad (here) and I'd give anything if people could make it beautiful again because it was beautiful and it had lots of love and lots of people. Unfortunately most of them are dead and they could tell you a better story than I can.

Nicholson: Thank you so very much.

Stauss: Well you've been a doll, thank you.

Nicholson: Tell us your name and how you first got here.

Slager: Legally my name is Mary Josephine Freeman Slager but I'm also known a Mae Jo Slager. My mother was married right here on the lawn. Where that fence is now there was a high hedge. I'm talking seven, eight feet high, and thick. From here they boarded a train to San Francisco, then to Manila for two years. He was foreign export salesman for the Caterpillar Tractor Company. My father brought a steam tractor here to harvest bean with and that's how he met her. He married her and stole her. My mother was Maria Antonia Freeman (Maria Antonia Magee Johnson Freeman). Her mother was Maria Antonia Magee (Victoria Pedroena Magee) and her mother was Maria Antonia Estudillo (Maria Antonia Estudillo Pedroena) from Old Town in San Diego.

Nicholson: And your father?

Slager: Harry Latimore Freeman. After my parents came back from the Philippines they went to Peoria, Illinois and he dispatched tractor salesmen all over the world for the Caterpillar Tractor Company.

Nicholson: What is your earliest recollection of the ranch, did you go to the beach?

Slager: No, no we rarely went to the beach. It was too dangerous for us children to go alone. It was ½ mile away and there were 11 miles of beach with no one to protect us. We did go down with the uncles to fish. We children would catch the soft shell crabs to put on their hooks to catch corbina which is a very good game fish. We always came home with one or two. They rarely got on the table for dinner as they were brought home, cooked immediately and eaten as an extra meal.

I spent two full summers here, three and four months at a time. I was going to school at San Luis Rey Mission Academy for Girls. I also had one year in sixth grade in Oceanside while living with my grandmother, so I was here for months at a time. My whole life revolved around (this place) as did all of us cousins. Our extended family was very important to us, much more than now when most (people) don't know their aunts and uncles like we did.

Nicholson: Where was your home located?

Slager: San Jacinto. My mother was a teacher in San Jacinto. My mother had some problems and it just didn't work out, that I could live with her all the time so maybe I lived here more than the others (cousins). My brother went away to college and I was down here at the ranch an awful lot with Uncle Louie, Aunt Ruth and Aunt Jane.

Nicholson: Did you help with the bean crop?

Slager: During the depression it got so bad that Aunt Ruth and I and some of the other kids followed the thresher and picked up beans and put them in a sack to sell. Times were hard. One summer they put me to work in the warehouse sorting beans. As the beans went by on a belt you were supposed to pick out the rocks. I worked three days and when they looked in my sack it was full of good beans. I thought they were rocks, so I

got fired. The warehouse was up along the railroad tracks about ¼ of a mile along what is the main road now.

Nicholson: You mentioned a huge hedge, what was its purpose?

Slager: Privacy. We had a lot of men working on the ranch and a lot of tractors. All this vegetation that you see here (now) was not here, it was all bean land, giant limas. My Aunt Jane was known as the Lima Bean Queen. There are gunnysacks still around that have 'Jane Magee – Lima Beans – Las Flores Ranch' written on them.

Nicholson: What is your favorite childhood memory?

Slater. I have so many. I can remember sitting in the room behind the staircase on Uncle Louie's lap in the wintertime picking out all that we wanted to buy out of the Sears Roebuck catalog. Oh, our Christmas's were just gorgeous. The Christmas tree in the front room, and that's not a very big room, was just huge. And we might have forty people here for Christmas, each one getting a gift. They were all under that tree. You could hardly get in that room so we were out on the porch. All the kids were put in the guest bedroom. There might be ten or twelve kids in there. All of the adults went to San Luis Rey Mission for midnight mass. When they came back we opened up gifts till two or three in the morning.

Nicholson: Did the padres come here?

Slager: Oh yes, we had a lot of priests who came here. Father Patrick was one of my favorites. Father Dominic from San Luis Rey Mission came; I had known him when I was a student there. I graduated in 1940. We had a garden on the other side of the house, towards the ocean. It had a picket fence like you see here and it was called Aunt Ruth's garden and the priests would go out there and say their morning mass and their morning prayers.

Nicholson: What kinds of things were in the garden?

Slager: Native things, things that can be stuck in the ground like geraniums, lupines, Aunt Ruth liked flowers. There was wisteria everywhere.

Nicholson: The front is enclosed now, was it when you were a child or was the staircase on the outside?

Slager: It was always enclosed when I was a child. I was born in 1922. But I have pictures of it with lattice and roses or bougainvillea on it.

(An unclear question is asked about something going all the way around. The answer is positive and Slager points up at the roof)

Slager: And I slept on the north side, the very far side on the porch for two summers in a row but it was enclosed. That was in 1932 and 1933 I think.

Nicholson: Did you come here as a teenager?

Slager: Oh yes, as a teen-ager I was here even more because I was in school at San Luis Rey and Aunt Ruth and Uncle Louie would pick me up and bring me in for the weekend.

Nicholson: Did you bring friends with you?

Slager: No, never.

Nicholson: As an adult what are your last recollections of being here?

Slager: They were very sad because my Aunt Ruth was the last one here. When the military took it over Roosevelt came by and said as long as any member of that generation were alive they could live here undisturbed. And the Marines honored that. Aunt Ruth was a Wolfskill by the way. She and Uncle Louie were first cousins and they had to have a dispensation from the Pope to marry and never have children. So they never had children but they took all of us in.

Nicholson: Do you remember the trains?

Slager: I remember they were very loud, always gave a great big whistle when they came

through. During the depression the hobos followed the railroad track and they would mark the ranches where they could get food. So we would have ten and twelve hobos outside the kitchen door almost every meal. As a young girl I was not allowed to go out in the yard during that time because of those hobos. I had to stay right here on the patio. I would have been ten, eleven then. That's Spanish, they're very careful with their girls.

Nicholson: Was there a station here?

Slager: Not here, but up about ½ mile where the warehouse was. That's where they brought in all the beans to be sorted. After the railroad went through in the 30's and 40's my aunt (Jane) would go down to San Diego two or three times a year and order all the supplies. And the supplies would come up by train. We'd have two wooden boxes of figs alone, maybe three boxes of apricots, six cases of milk. It would be dropped off at the station north of here and then we'd go pick it up with a wagon. It was a real thrill to go shopping with her! I went along a couple of times.

Nicholson: Would you say she was your favorite person here?

Slager: Aunt Jane was the first of ten children. She never married, she raised all those children. Her mother had ten children and died of complications after the last one was born. She (Aunt Jane) was the monarch of the family. No, I don't think she was my favorite, I think Auntie Wee (Luisa Magee) was; she was the second one between Jane and Hugh. She was adopted. She was just as strong in personality as Aunt Jane was, you never crossed either one, but I think she was a little more affectionate.

Nicholson: (Question is unintelligible, seems to be about the pile of adobe which was the one-time asistencia at Las Flores)

Slager: Yes, it had a roof on it when I first came here. Then Larry Magee, a first cousin of mine bragged about – I guess he tore it down. Yes we knew it was there. I was told it was a way station for people going to Los Angeles, the noon stop.

Nicholson: Do you remember any Native Americans being around?

Slager: No I don't.

Nicholson: You've seen Rancho Santa Margarita and this ranch today, what do you think?

Slager: I was not at Santa Margarita very much, only as a guest, I think I stayed overnight once, with Auntie Wee when she was the caretaker there. We had a lot of activity around here, aunts and uncles dropping in, everybody came here. For the three people living here, I don't think there were ever less than eight people here. Family. Of course there was always Pastor, he was the cook here for years and years. You want to know about him? My mother brought him back from Manila to help out, as my father was very ill. He had been their houseboy, was about fourteen years old. He stayed (in California) and worked all around, ending up here as a cook for the rest of his life. A good man, I miss him too. I loved him too.

Nicholson: Do you think we can restore Las Flores?

Slager: I hope so; it's going to take an awful lot of money. There's not too many of us around that can remember it as well as Jane (Stauss) and I can, maybe four. Yes, I think so, but you better hurry; don't let it fall down any more.

Nicholson: I hope not.

Slager: I hope I've answered your questions. Thank you.

Nicholson: What is your name and when was the first time you were here?

Keller: Betty Louise Keller. I came a million times with my parents as a little girl. My mother loved to be with her relatives, my father did too. We would come every summer and stayed in a hotel in Oceanside or with Auntie Wee (Luisa). I didn't grow up here like Mae Jo did as I lived in Pasadena.

Nicholson: What is your fondest memory of being here?

Keller: The time Aunt Jane introduced me to drinking tea and I never drink tea without thinking about that day. We were sitting on the porch drinking tea, but at age four I decided I wouldn't like tea. Aunt Jane told me to try it and I'll love it. She put a little tea, a lot of milk and big spoons of sugar in a beautiful china cup for me. I tried it and that was the beginning (of my tea drinking).

The thing that I need to tell, I think it's important, was the time when the Japanese submarine came. There were lima beans between here and the sea instead of brush like now. You couldn't see (the ocean) from here where we are now because there was a big cypress hedge all around with a gate that snapped back to keep the wolves out, and inside here were geese that were pretty aggressive. We were outside (the gate) saying goodbye, Spanish families have a real hard time saying goodbye because we talk a lot. We looked out at the sea and there was a Japanese sub. Uncle Louie ran and got his binoculars and there was the Rising Sun on the sub. He ran to the office and phoned Camp Pendleton. Then the planes came, real low, and started bombing all up and down (the coast). The next thing we heard was it surfaced up in Santa Barbara and fired ashore at the University there. I remember it very well. It was a Sunday afternoon and I was five or six during the war, it was when the United States was losing.

During the depression and during wartime there were a lot of people living here. The family was always dispensing food. My father had a good job with the Metropolitan Water District but we had a hard time getting food in Pasadena because of rationing. So we'd come here and fill up the car with big sacks of dried lima beans and fruits and vegetables. They never let us go home without all of that. We ate a lot of lima beans. My dad and I would say, "Oh no, not lima beans again" and my mom would say, "These are Uncle Louie's lima beans, you're eating them or else".

Nicholson: You were in your twenties when you began acting to save Las Flores.

Keller: The family had come down, a group of us met here. Aunt Ruth was just about to pass away, or she just had. We were sitting on the porch and we were lamenting, Las Flores was about to be demolished and what was going to happen to our beloved ranch,

some were close to tears. Nobody was saying anything positive about saving the ranch house. Going home up the freeway my mom and I started talking, I said that I thought somebody could do something about this. My mom said, "What can one person do against the whole United States government and the U.S. Marine Corps?" I thought it was worth a try. My mom and dad said all right go ahead but for gosh sakes don't include us, don't use our names. Bill Magee, Jane's (Stauss) father, was a friend of Ed Ainsworth who wrote a very good column for the Los Angeles Times. He was a very respected man. Somehow the family got wind of what I was doing and Ed called me. He then published a column about Las Flores. Then I began to get phone calls from all over and especially from the San Diego Union. Doctor Ted Lonergan of Santa Ana called and said he was an amateur historian. He and I and historians Helen Smith and Don Meadows formed a group called Amigos del Antano (Friends of the Past). We met at the Saddleback Inn in Santa Ana once a month and talked about Las Flores. I was in charge of the group. They had money, I didn't have any. They also had connections, which helped. It was Doctor Lonergan and I who wrote the application to put Las Flores on the Registry of National Historic Places. We sent it off with a prayer and our fingers crossed. Then the Marine Corps told me they were going to demolish Las Flores. The newspaper called me up and asked me what I was going to do. I said I'm going to take my two little children and come down to the ranch, sit on the porch, and if I have to chain myself to the pole I will, but they were not going to take the ranch down without a fight. Well, I didn't have to do it because the next day Las Flores made the registry of National Historic Places! I did a war dance all over Garden Grove, I was so happy I couldn't stand it. Then they (Marines) had to rescind the order and apologize to me in the San Diego Union. I loved it; they didn't like me at all out here, not at all. They decided to give me the ranch for one year and then after that we're going to finish off Las Flores, Mrs. Keller. So I had one year to go to State Parks, County Parks, Universities, Clubs, Historical Societies, you name it, my husband and I went and spoke to these groups. They all said golly Betty, what you are doing is wonderful but the problem is we don't have any money (to help you). Next, a group of Boy Scouts was hiking the El Camino Real Trail and couldn't get on Las Flores or the asistencia so the Marines told them to call me. We got the Scout

leader to come to our monthly meeting at Saddleback and he got real interested. He said how about if the Scouts take it over, he knew people on the Orange County Boy Scout Council. Well I thought that the Marines might like the Scouts so we decided to do it and that's how the lease got started (with the Boy Scouts).

Nichols: How do you feel about Las Flores today?

Keller. I feel good. It's a lot cleaner than two years ago when I was here with my grandchildren. It looks good today but we have a lot of work to do if it's going to be restored. I think my very proudest moment was when I brought my youngest child here. We had lived in Tennessee for twelve years and that's where she was born. She didn't know much about Las Flores because I never had told her. On the way down in the car I told her some about it. I took her over to that stone with the plaque over there and I said, "Anita, I did that, I'm responsible for saving this". Her response was, no, not my mother, she can't have done it. "Yes Anita, I did it, I did it!" She has gotten real interested and has traveled several times down here with me and other places where the Magee family have been. My middle child, Catherine, finally got the history fever because of me; I just can't stop talking about it. And my oldest daughter Christy is here with me today. I want to pass that heritage, that history on to my children and my children's children so that it doesn't die off because all that's left now is Mae Jo and her family and Jane and her son and daughter and me and my children.

Nicholson: Hopefully we can preserve this and make it something for all of our children's children and for the Marines to look at it as part of their history as well. Thank you again for coming out here. Hope you enjoyed your day.

Keller: Oh I loved it!