



A Mahan Memoir

Looking Back at Pleasant Valley with Ralph Mahan

Research Team

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by
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Before there was a county named Ventura and before the Camarillos settled on Rancho Calleguas, the Mahan family was established in Pleasant Valley. Their family roots are deep and long. Their accomplishments are many, including the present day Camarillo White Horses.

The Mahans came to Pleasant Valley in 1867 from the East Coast. John Mahan, Ralph Mahan's great-great grandfather was born in New York in 1827. After spending his formative years in New York City and Massachusetts, John worked as a cabin boy and later a seaman. In 1846 he enlisted in the United States Army at the outbreak of the Mexican-American War.

At the end of the war, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gave the United States the ownership of California in 1848. Not long after that, gold was discovered and like many others seeking their fortune, John Mahan went to the gold mines near Sacramento. Within three years, John realized he would not prosper as a miner. He was successful in another way. He met his future wife Rebecca Elizabeth Blakely. When she was four years old, her parents took her in a Calistoga wagon to California in 1842. She was just 15 years old when she married John Mahan in 1853. They would spend fifty- nine years together until his death in 1912.

It is not known what alerted John to the opportunities in Pleasant Valley, but in 1867, he rode horseback from Sonoma to Pleasant Valley. There he purchased 160 acres of land near what is now called Glenn Drive in Camarillo.

In 1868, John and Rebecca and their first five children arrived at their newly acquired ranch. They had been on the trail for several grueling weeks with wagons loaded with their goods. Their young sons helped to drive the cattle and horses.

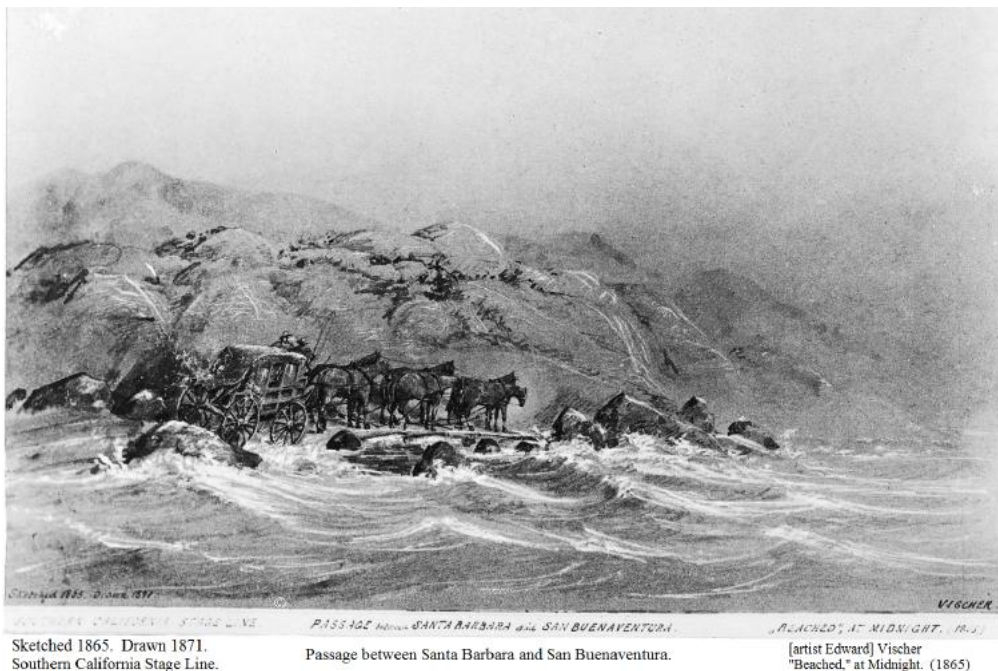
As part of the land ownership requirement, John and Rebecca made the necessary improvements. The land was situated in a disputed area of the Rancho El Rio de Santa Clara o la Colonia. The Mahans were unable to obtain a clear title.

They lost their land and improvements. The disappointment and set back would not discourage them.

According to *In They Lived and Died in Pleasant Valley* by Sherwood Milleman and Val Rains, John purchased another “120 acres just south of the Old Conejo road midway between what is now Carmen Drive and Las Posas Road and lived there the rest of their lives.” Four more children were born at this ranch. They also adopted the two young daughters of Rebecca’s deceased friend.

Also according to the Milleman and Rains’ book, John and Rebecca “were strong supporters of their community and the people in it. They were also of people who always seemed available to help a neighbor.”

Life in what was to become Ventura County was remote and rugged. Mail and supplies came by boat from Santa Barbara. The county government offices were located there. Traveling along the coastline was a terrifying challenge. Freight was brought by wagons or unloaded by ships. The first stage route came through Pleasant Valley in 1868. It included stops in Newbury Park and Springville.



John and Rebecca came to Pleasant Valley wanting opportunities for their children but there was no school. The closest school was in San Buenaventura (Ventura). School children, if they had transportation to Ventura, faced challenges

from the weather. During the rainy season, the Santa Clara River was a dangerous crossing. It would be years before a bridge was built.

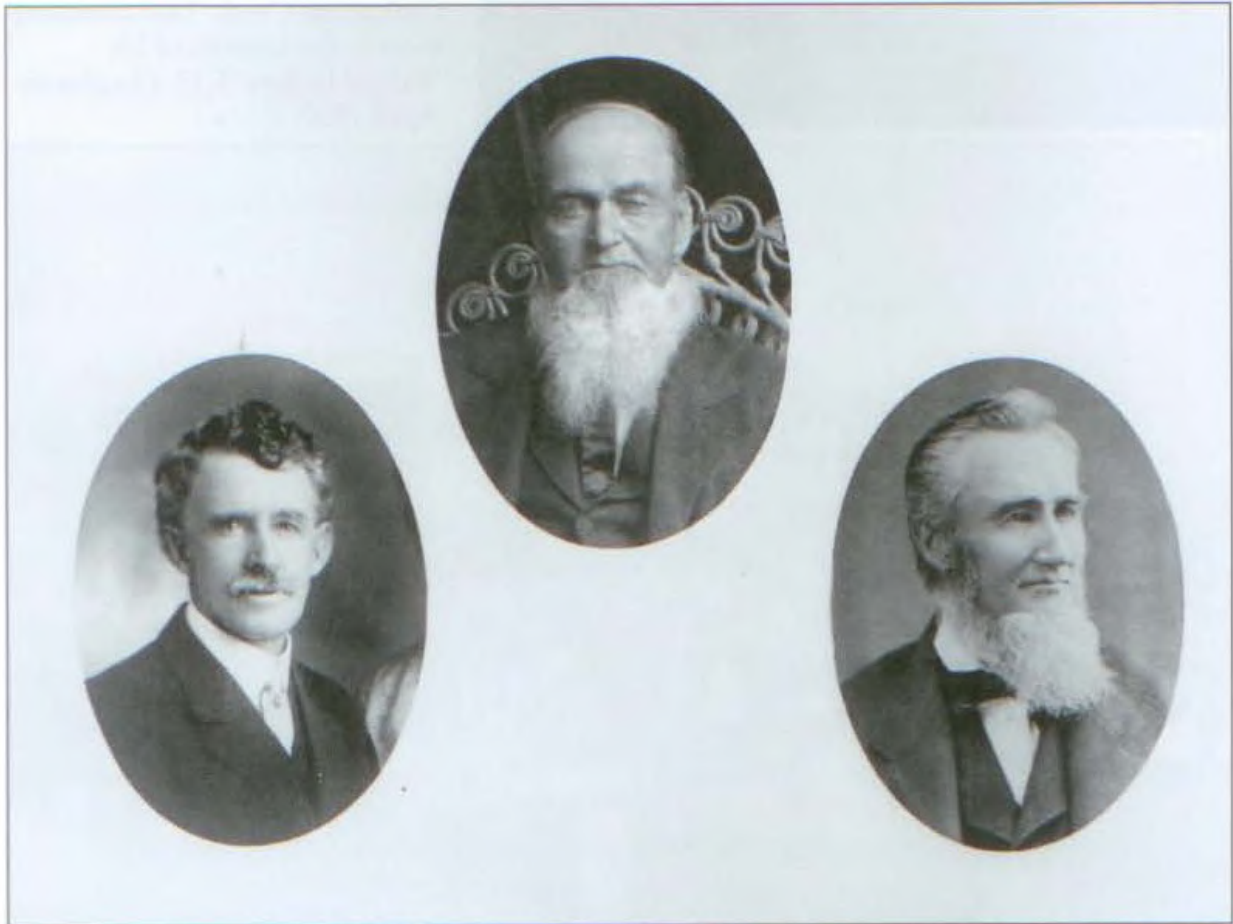
The first bridge over the Santa Clara River opened in 1898. That was thirty years after the Pleasant Valley School district was established. Benjamin Wells Dudley, Clerk of the Board of Supervisors, officiated the opening ceremony with his family. The bridge was not replaced until 1932 with what was said to be the longest in the state highway system.



Opening ceremony of the Santa Clara Bridge 1898 Photo: Dudley House

To set up a school, John, along with Jeremiah Sisson and Frank Davenport went to Santa Barbara to obtain a permit to start a school in Pleasant Valley. They braved

the journey to Santa Barbara. Traveling along the coast was extremely difficult. There were several places where the cliffs almost reached the ocean making the road passable only at low tide. The school permit was granted on November 10, 1868. It would be called the Pleasant Valley School District and is the oldest existing school district in Ventura County. The district has retained its original name.



The original members of the Pleasant Valley School District, formed on November 10, 1868, included, from left to right, Frank Davenport, John Mahan, and Jeremiah Sisson. The first-year classes were held in Hugo Carlson's granary, and six students attended.

The first class of six pupils in 1868-69 was held in an abandoned granary on the Hugo Carlson Rancho on Somis Road. In 1869, another granary built by parents (located near the present Carmen intersection and the North frontage road) became the classroom. Students walked or rode horseback to school. There were very few books and the children supplied their own writing materials.

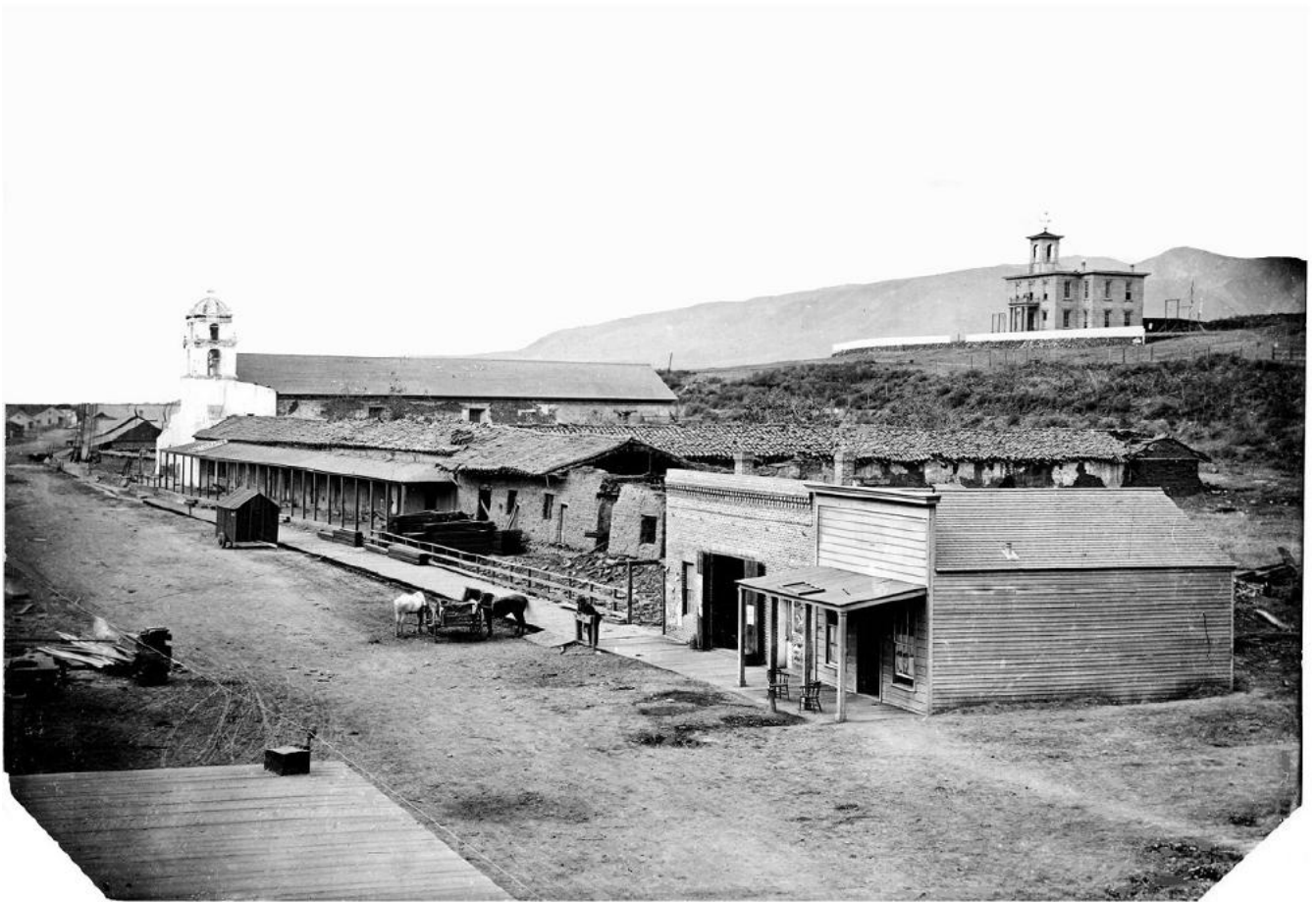
In 1895, Adolfo Camarillo began one of the longest school board tenures in the state. At the time, there were 57 students and two teachers. He served the Pleasant Valley School District Board of Trustees until 1951, including serving as Clerk of the Board (1898-1915) and President (1945-1951). He served 56 years as a Trustee.



Adolfo Camarillo's children attended Pleasant Valley School. His daughters Rosa and Ave are in this school photo.

John Mahan worked to divide a portion of Santa Barbara County into its own entity. On January 1, 1873, Ventura County was created out of the south-easterly section of Santa Barbara County. The name "Ventura" was used even though the county seat was "San Buenaventura." Two islands, Anacapa and San Nicholas, were included in the new county. John Mahan and his son Sam both signed the documents to create Ventura County.

Main Street Ventura 1874
Photo by Brewster
Mission and Hill School



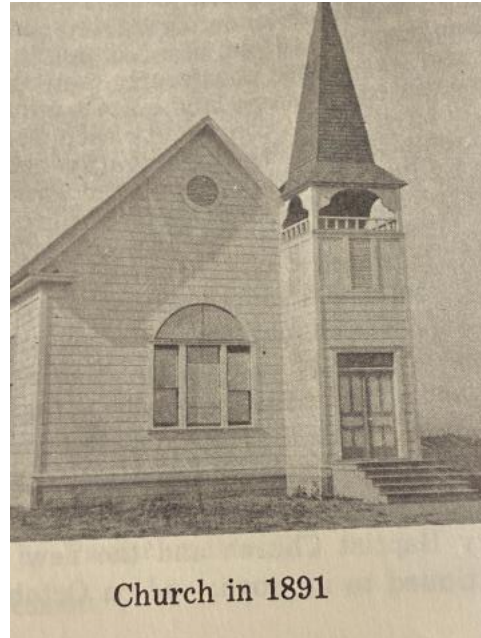


Photo from [Pleasant Valley Baptist Church 1869-1969](#)

Closer to home, the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church was organized in 1869 through the efforts of John Mahan, Frank Davenport and Jeremiah Sisson. The trio, who had successfully established the Pleasant Valley School District, helped found one of the oldest Baptist churches in continuous service in Southern California.

In the last will and testament of Juan Camarillo, Adolfo's brother, the church received a bequest:

'As a mark of gratitude and appreciation for the many acts of kindness shown to me by the pastors and people of the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church, and the spirit of tolerance and respect always manifested by them toward the Catholic people of Camarillo, I give, devise and bequeath unto the Pleasant Valley Baptist Church of Camarillo, County of Ventura, State of California, the sum of Five Thousand (\$5,000.00) and no/100 Dollars.'

News of the legacy was reported in the Los Angeles Times in September 1936.

Land had always been important to Ralph Mahan, John's great-great grandson. "I always lived on a ranch and since I was two years old, always had a horse." Like his great-great grandparents, Ralph learned the key to success was in land. He attended local schools before majoring in agricultural-business at Cal Poly.

An interest in history led him to study the biography of Thomas Robert Bard in the extensive two volume set, Oil, Land and Politics by Professor W. H. Hutchinson. After graduating, Ralph also used the book as a guideline to understanding government, land and investments. Bard had arrived in Ventura County in 1864 and served as a member of the Board of Supervisors for Santa Barbara County. In 1871 he was appointed commissioner to organize Ventura County. John Mahan had also worked for the development of Ventura County. During this time Bard purchased and subdivided Rancho El Rio de Santa Clara o la Colonia. It was in this area that John Mahan's first home was lost in the land dispute. Bard, a Republican, served in the United States Senate from 1900 to 1905. He has been the only U.S. senator from Ventura County.

Understanding money and land management, as well as working toward investment goals started at an early age for Ralph Mahan. It was an important lesson taught by local rancher and famous film actor, Joel McCrea. Ralph, about 9 years old, shyly approached McCrea and asked if he could buy one of the McCrea Ranch calves. The price he learned was ten dollars. After working and saving, Ralph presented the ten dollars to Joel. McCrea counted the money but took only two dollars. He returned eight dollars to Ralph. "It was a small calf," said Joel. But what he really wanted, was to see if Ralph could work and save for the calf. Ralph grew up greatly admiring Joel McCrea. The two became close friends.

For countless years, Ralph has participated in The Sheriff's Posse. It was formed in the early 1940s as a volunteer group of mostly farmers and ranchers who assisted in patrolling the Ventura County coastline during World War II. After the war, the group continued to serve the Sheriff with search and rescue operations. Today the 105 men and women volunteers are dedicated to the principles of good law enforcement. They volunteer their time, horse and equipment.



Ventura County Sheriff's Posse

In 1945 another equestrian group was established. Rancheros Adolfo took its first back country ride in Ventura County. A majority of the members also belong to Los Rancheros Visitadores. Ralph rode many years in Rancheros Adolfo.

Oxnard Press-Courier dated Thursday, April 9, 1953



MOUNTED BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL MEN of Ventura County, known as the Rancheros Adolfo, left the Sedden Ranch 36 miles northeast of Oxnard in the Los Padres National Forest this afternoon for their annual three-day ride

to "get away from everyday routine." Picture was taken on the John Broome Ranch south of Oxnard as group began last year's trek.

—Press-Courier Staff Photo.

A longtime friendship between Ralph Mahan, the great-great grandson of John Mahan, and Harold Parker, the great grandson of Adolfo Camarillo also resulted in the development successful breeding program of the Camarillo White Horse breed.

Somewhere along the line Ralph met his very close friend Harold Parker:

"Ralph and I met so long ago I don't recall the exact circumstances, but it was probably at the Rancheros Adolfo annual trail ride. We have shared many great times on the trail and hunting together. He loves to tease me that the Mahans came to the county before the Camarillos.

Ralph had a beautiful palomino paint mare that he brought on the ride. She had a great disposition and confirmation. I asked Ralph if he might be interested in breeding her to my Camarillo White Horse stallion, Panchito. He said yes and we arranged for me to bring Panchito to Ralph's ranch to breed the mare. As I recall this was Panchito's first time to breed a mare. The breeding went smoothly until it was time for me to load Panchito in my trailer and take him home. Panchito had always loaded easily, but not this time. He had no intention of leaving that mare behind. Ralph and I tried every trick we knew to get him to load without success. He

was staying!! We finally loaded the mare into Ralph's trailer and he drove away while I had Panchito watch. I walked Panchito around a little to show him that his new love had indeed left. Then I walked him over to my trailer and he walked right in to go home. I always had the mares come to him after that. How did the breeding turn out? The mare had a beautiful filly. She was not white but was a beautiful paint that looked just like the horse Hildago in the movie by the same name.

Ralph didn't give up and kept breeding. I think his third try resulted in a white filly. He then started to breed to Peruvian Paso horses to get a white Peruvian Paso with the Paso gate. He has succeeded. His Camarillo White Horses are all very good looking with good temperaments. I am very grateful to Ralph and all he has done to perpetuate the Camarillo White Horse."

Today because of the efforts of Ralph, Harold and members of the Camarillo White Horse Association, there are 20 Camarillo White Horses. "It makes them one of the rarest breeds in the world," noted Harold. Ralph currently has four of these exclusive beauties. Three mares, Christina, Maria and Maya, and stallion Rowdy make up the string. Ralph's first colt by Harold's stallion, Panchito, was named after Meliton Ortiz who was the longtime trainer and guardian of Camarillo Ranch White Horses.



"Meliton"



“Here’s a good photo of one of Ralph’s mares with her foal.” Harold Parker

Ralph enjoys sharing the Camarillo White Horses with his three children and seven grandchildren. “The three youngest grandchildren love the horses. They love to ride,” said Ralph. The Camarillo Christmas Parade is an important event for the Mahan family and their beautiful horses.

Camarillo Christmas Parade (undated)
Ralph Mahan (blue shirt) and grandchildren

