Felipa Osuna:  
“The Oldest Resident of Old Town in 1878” 

Translated and Edited by Rose Marie Beebe and Robert Senkewicz

Introduction

After speaking with Juana Machado, another San Diego Californiana, Thomas Savage interviewed Felipa Osuna. Her ancestry symbolized the close-knit and interrelated nature of many members of the Californio community. Her maternal grandmother was María Feliciana de Arballo, the widow whose behavior on the second Anza expedition had so upset Father Pedro Font. María Feliciana was also the maternal grandparent of Josefa Carrillo, whom Henry Cerruti had interviewed more than two years previously. Felipa Osuna’s paternal grandparents were Juan Ismerio de Osuna and María Ignacia Alvarado. They were also the paternal grandparents of Miguel Avila, whose widow, María Inocenta Pico, Savage himself would interview in less than three months’ time.

Juan Ismerio de Osuna had been a member of the presidio company at Loreto, in Baja California, and was a member of the Portolá expedition in 1769. After the expedition he returned to Baja California, where he continued in the military. In 1774, Governor Felipe de Barri sent him as a special courier with some important reports he wished to send to Mexico City. He went to Alta California in the 1770s and served at the San Diego presidio and with the mission guard at San Gabriel. He died at that mission in 1790. In 1806 Juan María Osuna, son of Juan Ismerio de Osuna and María Ignacia Alvarado, married Juliana Josefa López, daughter of Francisco López and María Feliciana de Arballo, at Mission San Diego. Their second child, María Felipa de Jesús Catarina Osuna, was born in 1809. In 1834, Felipa Osuna married Juan María Marrón, a seaman and trader who had settled in San Diego around 1821. At least three children survived into adulthood.

Felipa Osuna’s husband and father were both very involved in public life in the San Diego area. They were both involved in the movement against Governor Victoria in 1831. Her father received Rancho San Dieguito in the early 1830s. Her husband served as regidor, elector, and juez suplente before 1845, when he was made administrator of the former mission of San Luis Rey. He was chosen alcalde of San Diego in 1846. Juan María Marrón was granted Rancho Agua Hedionda, just south and east of present-day Carlsbad, in the 1830s. Marrón began living there in 1839 or 1840. J. J. Warner testified that the rancho “had an adobe house, corrals, 

Rose Marie Beebe is Professor of Spanish and Robert M. Senkewicz is Professor of History at Santa Clara University. They have previously collaborated on Lands of Promise and Despair: Chronicles of Early California, 1535-1846 (2001) and The History of Alta California by Antonio María Osio (1996). The original transcript of Felipa Osuna’s Recollections is in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

231
cultivated fields, and a respectable stock of cattle and horses.” His family normally stayed there for the summer and fall and returned to San Diego in the winter. Marrón died on September 11, 1853. After the death of her husband, Felipa Osuna continued to live both at the rancho and in the city. She made frequent trips to Agua Hedionda throughout the 1850s. In the 1870s, Judge Benjamin Hayes called her the oldest resident of Old Town.

When Savage began his interview with Felipa Osuna, he seemed to want her to talk about her father and her husband. She gave him very brief descriptions of their careers. But as she was describing her husband’s tenure as administrator of the ex-mission of San Luis Rey, she began to defend his reputation against those who claimed that he was one of those who had despoiled the mission property for personal gain. She even cited a source—the mission inventory—as evidence for her judgment. Then she spent a great deal of time describing the final years of Father José María Zalvidea, who had spent forty years as a missionary in California. More than thirty years after his death, she was still very protective of him; she tended to attribute his more bizarre behavior to exhaustion resulting from his constant penances and his years of selfless dedication.

Felipa Osuna’s remembrance of Father Zalvidea’s death at San Luis Rey led her into a set of reminiscences about the war, since American troops had occupied the former mission in early 1847. Many Californios found themselves quite conflicted about how to react to the American invasion, and Felipa Osuna’s testimonio offered a sharp illustration of the cross-currents that affected portions of the California community. On the one hand, she proudly remembered how she had hidden José Matías Moreno, Pío Pico’s secretary, from the Americans. Yet she was also bitter about the way in which the Californio forces had appropriated the one hundred head of cattle that Father Zalvidea had given her. She and her husband were accused by some of being on the side of the invaders, and her account
of those tension-filled months of late 1846 and early 1847 vividly captures the divisions within the community as the Americans were assuming control of the land.

As Felipa Osuna described the condition of her house during the war, she was reminded of her role in thwarting the Indian attack in San Diego, of which Juana Machado had earlier spoken to Savage. Felipa Osuna’s memories of the episode were mixed. While she was gratified that the attack had been prevented, she was greatly troubled by the violent retribution which some soldiers exacted against Indians living in the pueblo. Since she had been one of the informants against the Indians, she felt personally responsible for the summary executions of some Indians that had taken place then.

In his introduction to his interview with Felipa Osuna, Savage wrote, “Her memory is at fault upon many events that occurred in her earlier years. For that reason I gave up the hope I had entertained of getting much information from her on local matters.” That judgment was too harsh, and it indicated that Savage could be too focused on politics and battles to appreciate what he was hearing from the women he interviewed. Felipa Osuna’s testimonio was extremely valuable, recalling in a unique fashion the tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties that were so prominent a part of life in Mexican California in the 1830s and 1840s. California was economically opening to the world in that period, but indigenous peoples hostile to the Mexican presence were regaining ever more control of the southern boundaries. Relations between the peripheral territory of Alta California and the
metropolis of Mexico City were strained. Some Californians wanted to strengthen ties to the Mexican Republic, of which California was a part, while others desired to emulate Texas and become independent of Mexico. Still others believed that a viable future demanded some sort of affiliation with a European power or with the United States. Felipa Osuna’s testimonio captured California life in all of that tension and uncertainty.

Recollections of Doña Felipa Osuna de Marrón, Native of San Diego, Where She Currently Lives, with Various Original Documents from the Private Files of This Same Señora, Who Gave Them to the Bancroft Library, 1878

This lady has been a widow 25 years, resides in San Diego, and is connected with most of the old families of the place, either by blood or marriage.

She seems quite intelligent, but is entirely unable to remember dates, and her memory is at fault upon many events that occurred in her earlier years. For that reason I gave up the hope I had entertained of getting much information from her on local matters.

She was very happy to learn that Mr. Bancroft was engaged upon a history of her native country from its earliest days and desired me to express to him her best wishes for his success.

Thos. Savage
North San Diego (old town)
January 26, 1878

Madame Marrón told me that all her husband’s papers on public matters were burnt, that she had only such as relating to their real estate.

I, Felipa Osuna de Marrón, was born at the old presidio of San Diego on May 1, 1809. My father was Juan María Osuna and my mother was Juliana López. My father was a soldier and a corporal of the San Diego company and served for many years. After his retirement, he established his residence in San Diego. Over a period of years he held the posts of regidor, síndico, alcalde, and justice of the peace. He had the satisfaction of earning the high regard of his peers. He died when he was about sixty years old.

When I was about twenty years old, I married Juan María Marrón, a rancher. He also held positions in public office in San Diego and was the district elector. Finally, the government appointed him administrator of Mission San Luis Rey. Unfortunately, when he took over the mission, it was already in very bad shape. There were barely any agricultural fields left at the mission and there was very little in the storehouses. This was clear from the inventory that Don José Joaquín Ortega gave Marrón. Ortega was Marrón’s predecessor. The sad truth is that when Marrón was the mission administrator he did not receive any wages, yet he personally had to maintain the mission and the missionary, Father José María Zalvidea. For this reason, Father Zalvidea was so grateful to me and my husband. The Father had seen how José Joaquín Ortega was embezzling, and he continually reprimanded him for that in no uncertain terms. He even said that Señor Ortega had taken tables, planks, benches, and everything else that was in the storehouses.

Because of statements like this, Señor Ortega and others were in the habit of saying that Father Zalvidea was crazy. In fact, whenever somebody came to visit, and even when he was by himself, Father Zalvidea would burst forth with those denunciations of Ortega.
Father Zalvidea would have moments of spiritual intensity. He could be heard speaking with the devil. He would then stamp his foot heavily on the ground and shout, “Go away, Satan. You are not going to upset me. You cannot have power over me.” This went on continuously, day and night, in the mission plaza, in the corridors, or in his own room.

During the final moments of Father Zalvidea’s life, Father Vicente Pascual Oliva, Doña Isidora Pico, Don Juan Avila, Doña Apolinaria Lorenzana, and many others came to the [San Luis Rey] mission to take Father Zalvidea to Mission San Juan Capistrano in a carreta that was very well-lined. When he found out that they were coming for him, he said, “Come on now, come on now. Yes, Lord, they are coming for me, but I cannot go because I am dying like a good soldier. I hear confessions and baptize here. What will this place be like without a Father?” Father Oliva and Doña Apolinaria told him that it was not possible for him to stay there. He was reluctant, but in the end, they decided that they would take him against his will the next morning. They paid no attention to what he was saying. He told them that I was taking very good care of him and that I had been like a mother to him. There was nothing he lacked. He said he did not want them to move him from there. He also said that everything he had in his trunks would be mine when he died. He had a little bit of money and a silver shell. They did not give me anything that was in the trunks. But before he died, he had given me the cows. When the American forces came, Californio troops ate all the cows. They did not leave me a single one.

Doña Apolinaria and I discussed the situation and I told her that Father Zalvidea was very weak and would not endure the trip. But since they were determined to take him the following morning, it would be wise to give him the last rites that evening, just in case. I said the same thing to Father Oliva, and they gave him the last rites.

Mission San Luis Rey, drawn by Frenchman Auguste Duhaut-Cilly, who visited the mission in 1827. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
That night, Father Zalvidea sent everybody out of his room. Doña Apolinaria thought that he would be able to travel, because he seemed so happy. His eyes were lively and he did not look like a man who was about to die. In the early morning the page came and informed us that he had just gone in to see Father Zalvidea and found him dead. That is what really happened. Father Zalvidea was so revered by everyone. Before he was buried, everybody cut off a little piece of his habit or his cord. He was practically left without any habit at all.

He had given me a large crucifix and another small one, and an image of the Virgen del Pilar. I still have these items. He also gave me a gold reliquary that he kept at the head of his bed. I left it there and somebody stole it from me. He was buried the next day after Mass on the left-hand side of the altar. His predecessor, Father Francisco, was buried on the other side. After the burial, people came on behalf of the Fathers and demanded that I turn over the one hundred cows, but the Californio soldiers had already eaten them. Even if I had them, I would not have turned them over.

Mission San Luis Rey was sold by Governor Pico to José Antonio Pico and José Antonio Cota. In 1846, José Antonio Pico came and told my husband that he was now the administrator and that the mission was his. My husband told him, “Well, I will hand over the mission to you just as I received it.” Pico did not take it and left for Pala. Later, Don Juan Forster came to take possession of the mission in the name of the buyers, right when Frémont’s troops were approaching. Forster left my husband in charge of the mission so he could manage it for the owners.

Magdalena Baca, the wife of Lieutenant José Antonio Pico, would tell me, “This mission is now mine.” I answered her, “Mi-a-u (meow) says the cat.” The people who are going to own the mission are already coming from over there.” [Lt. Col. John C.] Frémont entered the mission with troops at about one or two o’clock in the afternoon and left the following morning. My husband was at his rancho, Agua Hedionda, so the Americans decided to wait for him. I was so frightened, but they were not disrespectful to me at all. They did not ask me for anything. After my husband arrived, the Americans did a thorough check of the mission and then left to set up camp by El Chorro.

When those troops arrived, Don José Matías Moreno was having an afternoon snack with me. Don José was the secretary for the governor’s office. Moreno had told me that my cousin, Pío Pico, was fleeing and was hiding at Santa Margarita. I left Don Matías seated in the sala and casually went over to the door. All of a sudden I saw the entire mission surrounded and the corridor filled with armed foreigners. Very agitated, I shouted, “My dear Don Matías, the entire place is filled with armed men. They surely are coming for you.” He said he did indeed think they were coming for him. He was very frightened and said, “God help
me. Where can I hide?” He wanted to hide in one of the large cupboards in the last room, but I told him not to, because they would easily find him there. The situation was very tense and there was no time to ponder. Don Juan Rowland was on his way with the troops. I did not want to leave until Don Matías was well hidden. I came up with an idea. He could pretend to be sick. First he would have to get undressed, tie a rag around his head, and then climb into bed in a nearby room.

When Don Juan Rowland asked me about the administrator, I said that he had gone to our rancho and would return shortly. Rowland saw that I was shaking, so he approached me and told me not to be afraid, nothing was going to happen to me. He then told me that they had come to the mission in search of the governor and his secretary. I told them they could not enter the mission without my husband being there. Rowland told me that they had no intention of showing any disrespect and would not enter. Then I said, “Well, if you want to come in, you can search the whole house. You will only find a nephew of mine who is sick in bed,” and I pointed to the room. The bed was at the entrance to the room. After my husband arrived and had taken off his spurs, they searched the house. Very quickly and in a low voice I told my husband what I had said to Rowland about my “nephew” so that he would be forewarned. They went in, walked around the room, and looked at the “sick person.” They did not suspect him to be the secretary. Aside from that search, they did not do anything else.

If Don Matías Moreno had hidden himself where he had suggested, they would have caught him the minute they searched the cupboards. When they were unable to open the door of an upstairs storage area, because the key was lost, they knocked down the door. They thought that the secretary was in there, but they realized they had made a mistake. That night they camped by El Chorro.

After the men who had conducted the search left, Don Matías got up and sent for Don Santiago Emilio Argüello, who was with the Americans. Argüello was a friend of his. I could not understand why he did something so crazy. As soon as I discovered that he had sent that message, I became very angry and told him to saddle up and leave immediately. And he did just that. He left on a magnificent horse that my husband had. He mounted the horse and had barely gotten through the back gate of the mission when a party arrived with Santiago Emilio Argüello and Captain Gillespie in the lead. They wanted to see Moreno, but we said that he had already left. Gillespie became very angry with my husband and made him leave the mission. They sent search parties out in all directions but they were not able to catch Don Matías. He later told me that he watched his pursuers from a vantage point where he could not be detected. He knew that Pío Pico was hiding at Santa Margarita and went there to meet up with him. Later, they were able to go to Baja California.
I never suspected that the Americans would have been looking for Don Matías Moreno or we would not have been so careless. He was within an inch of being caught.

Very shortly after, my husband and I went back to our rancho.

My husband never got involved in the intrigues of those times.

When the Americans took San Diego, my husband brought me here. When the Californio forces under the command of Leonardo Cota and José Alipaz were around these parts, my husband went to the rancho and left me behind here. The Californios seized him and wanted to make him go with them to fight against the Americans. San Diego was full of Americans. Don Miguel Pedrorena, Don Santiago Emilio Argüello, Don Pedro C. Carrillo, and others had sided with the Americans. We, the women, all left our homes and gathered together at the Estudillo home. The Californios were coming down from the small fort they had erected on the hill. I wanted to go and be with my husband, but he had to obtain permission from Alipaz and Cota to come and take me away from there. That is why we raised a white flag at the house. Alipaz and Cota told Marrón that he would not be seized by the Americans because he was on good terms with Pedrorena, Argüello, and Carrillo. Those at the Estudillo home allowed him to enter because the Californios saw me waving a white flag. After he entered, I felt bad because Pedrorena and a party of Americans went out to receive him. They seized his horse and weapons and took him to the barracks. Since he was delayed here for a number of days and had not returned to the Californios’ camp with me, they believed he had gone over to the American side and became very angry with him. The delay was because he had not been able to obtain the safe-conduct pass from the commodore.

We were very anxious to go and reunite with our countrymen. I was very afraid of the Americans because they were undisciplined troops. We finally managed to leave under our word of honor that we would not take up arms against the United States. They gave us a safe-conduct pass and wherever we met up with American troops, we showed them the paper and they let us pass. My husband, our children,
Felipa Osuna: "The Oldest Resident of Old Town"

and I traveled on foot. We thought that we would be welcomed at the mission by our countrymen but discovered that they were furious with Marrón and even wanted to shoot him. The Californios had taken all of the horses from our rancho. They made us go on foot to Agua Hedionda. I stayed there. They took my husband and all of the non-Indian servants with them. They accused my husband of sending messages to the Americans, which is something that had never occurred to him. He was in great danger of being killed by them.

In the end, my husband pretended to be very ill, so they allowed him to go back to the rancho to recover. All of the Californio forces in the area would come early in the morning and take our cattle. That is how we lost a large part of our cattle and the cattle that Father Zalvidea had given me. During the time they kept my husband prisoner, the Indians helped me gather a good deal of corn, beans, and a large amount of grain, and we hid everything in chamizales. That is how we were able to have food to eat when the war ended.

The accusations that Marrón and I were allied with the Americans did not cease. My husband was upset that his countrymen would treat him this way and that they were making off with all his possessions. So, soon after the battle of San Pascual, my husband wrote a letter to the commodore and asked him if he could return to San Diego. The commodore responded and told him he could come back and so could anyone else for that matter. Everyone would be welcomed and no one would be harmed.

My children went about recovering what few cattle remained. The Californios thought my children were doing this for them! One day, around three or four o’clock in the afternoon, we left the rancho with two carretas loaded with birds and anything else we could gather up. We also had a flock of lambs and some cattle that we were trying to hurry along. We traveled on foot, while others went on horseback or in carretas. We traveled all night along the beach and arrived at Tecolote at dawn as the cornet was sounding reveille in the plaza. My husband waved a white flag and they immediately came to receive us and allowed us to enter. The flock of lambs and the cattle stayed behind. The commodore provided my husband with some men to help him bring the animals in. Commodore Stockton always showed my husband great kindness.

The Americans were stunned when they saw the lances carried by some of the
men who came with my husband. These were men who had fought in the battle of San Pascual. Among them were Jesús Machado and my brother, Leandro Osuna. My brother was the person who killed Captain Antonio, the man who attacked Andrés Pico. The bandolier of my brother’s lance was bloodstained. I saw that the Americans appeared to be angry with him and were making hostile gestures. I feared that we were going to have trouble, but they did not do anything to us. Two days later, the cattle arrived and the Americans were very happy. My countrymen were in for a huge disappointment the day after we left the rancho. When they came for cattle, as usual, there was not a single soul at the rancho except for the Indians. The doors were closed, so they knocked them down and did other damage. They took whatever they could find of value, but they did not dare follow us, because they believed that the commodore had sent an escort to accompany Mar-rón to San Diego. Some of the Californios would come as far as the little hill, but they were not bold enough to go any farther than that.

The Californios always went to the little hill to shout shameless remarks and spew threats. Frequently, some of them would enter San Diego at night. One day, they fired a shot from the small fort. Pedrorena and I were headed to my home and the shot just missed Pedrorena’s leg as it flew. He reacted by taking off his hat and bowing to the Californios.

The Americans had the house in which I am currently living completely surrounded by trenches and embrasures. Some of Frémont’s men were mercenaries, and one day they robbed our home. Robberies became almost commonplace until the commodore arrived to begin his march to Los Angeles. We were then well protected and received daily rations.

On December 29, 1846, Commodore [Robert] Stockton, General [Stephan Watts] w, and a respectable force left San Diego for Los Angeles. There were no longer any Californio troops in these parts. We stayed in San Diego and divided our time between here and the rancho.

The commodore bought all the cattle, sheep (about one thousand), and other things that we had brought from the rancho. He paid for everything in cash. The
Felipa Osuna: “The Oldest Resident of Old Town”

only things they still owed us for were the twenty-five good horses that Gillespie took and a few other items my husband forgot to list on his claim. After I was widowed, I received a payment order from the government for the twenty-five horses. A man took it from me to collect the money and never brought the money back to me.

One day, when I was in this same house, I saw that some Indians were talking to my gardener, a Diegueño Indian named Juan. I already had been noticing that every afternoon other Indians would come and speak with him. Since I understood the Indian language, I took great care to find out what they were talking about on that particular day. They did not have the slightest idea that I could understand them, so they spoke frankly. They began by saying that they had formulated a plan to rob Captain Fitch’s store and kill Lawrence Hatwell. Then they planned to take Fitch’s wife and me with them. Captain Fitch was away on a trip and he had asked my husband and me to spend the nights at his house during that time. The Indians who were engaged in that conversation with my gardener were two Indians from the Fitch home and a fellow named Juan Antonio who was a cook at the Estudillo home. From their various conversations, I discovered that they had jaras prepared at the old presidio. After they finally had said when they would put their plan into action, I thought I should warn my husband and alert Señora Fitch. The plan was for the Indians to enter the Fitch home in the evening when she was kneading bread. They would kill Hatwell, rob the store, and take both of us out through the back door to the horses they would have ready and waiting.

After I warned my husband, he notified Hatwell but told him that he did not know if it was true or not. At nightfall, I went to the Fitch home. It was already dark when Josefa Carrillo de Fitch began to knead bread in the dining room. Two tall, strong Indians came and stood right in the doorway as if to block the path. Hatwell and my husband were prepared and they went and grabbed them. The Indians did not put up a fight.

Very early the next morning, Alférez Macedonio González arrived in the pueblo with some armed men. One of the men was José María Soto. They set out to look for the Indians but as soon as the Indians began to get suspicious, they realized that they had no place to hide. González seized the two Indians from the Fitch home and Juan Antonio, the Indian from the Estudillo home. My Indian had left very early to look for firewood, and he was never seen again. There was another Indian, named Carrancio, and I believe a few others. I do not know exactly how many were shot. I only know about the three main players. They were taken to the juzgado. From what they said in their statements, they appeared to be guilty. Macedonio González ordered that they be shot right then and there. This was the same place where Kearny’s dragoons who

Josefa Bandini Carillo ©SDHS #16700-3.
died at San Pascual were later buried. Many more were captured, but not all were sentenced to death. I know that one Indian from the Bandini home was set free, but he suffered for the rest of his life until he died.

When I saw how much the Indians suffered, it caused me great sorrow knowing that I had informed against them. It distressed me greatly. The judge, Don José Antonio Estudillo, did not approve of the violent methods Macedonio used with the Indians. However, I must confess that the punishment produced a very beneficial effect, because after that, there were no more robberies by Indians in San Diego. Before that, we were on constant alert because there were always rumors that the Indians were coming to attack us.

One night the Indians attacked Pío Pico’s Rancho Jamul. His family had come to San Diego. The Indians killed the mayordomo, Juan Leiva, and other gente de razón. They took two young girls with them, Tomasa and Ramona, and nothing has ever been learned about their fate. Their mother appeared in San Diego, naked, with her little son Claro.

I do not remember when those events happened.

Felipa Osuna de Marrón
by Thomas Savage
North San Diego
January 26, 1878
[from a loose page] It was painful to see Macedonio's people running after the Indians like a pack of hunting dogs. Some of the Indians were pulled out of their homes, others were lassoed as they tried to run away, terrified. One of the Indians came into my house and begged me to hide him, but his pursuers saw him go in and he was caught. I was so sorry that I had informed on the conspirators. The other women also felt sorry for the Indians and accused me of causing the whole thing. How could I have concealed a conspiracy against the lives, liberty, and possessions of so many people? They would have died. What would have been the fate of the women of San Diego if the Indians had seized them? It was confirmed that the Indians who were shot had been conspiring with the hostile Indians from the outside. They may have confessed to this, but I did not hear them say anything about it when they were talking in our garden..
NOTES


5. Land Case 238, Southern District (Agua Hedionda).


7. She was referring to Francisco González de Ibarra, who died in 1842.

8. Magdalena Baca said, "Ahora esta mission es mía." Felipa Osuna de Marrón was mocking Baca by exaggerating the pronunciation of the word “mía” to make it sound like the "meow” or “miau” (Spanish) of a cat.


10. At the Battle of San Pasqual, Captain Benjamin D. Moore first shot at Andrés Pico, the Californio commander, but he missed. Moore then charged at Pico with his sword, but he was killed by the lances of several Californio soldiers who were near Pico. Lieutenant Thomas C. Hammond came to assist Moore, but he was also struck by a lance, and he died two hours later. See Neal Harlow, California Conquered: The Annexation of a Mexican Province (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 185.

This depiction of Andrés Pico at the former mission of San Fernando was drawn by Edward Vischer in 1865. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.