

Leon B. Rowland

The best analysis of Leon Rowland's Card Files, his research on local history topics, and his place in relation to other local historians, is that of Sandy Lydon's.

The following Introduction by Sandy Lydon is reprinted from Leon Rowland's *Santa Cruz, The Early Years*: The collected historical writings of Leon Rowland —including— "Old Santa Cruz Mission", "Villa de Branciforte", "The Story of Old Soquel", "The Annals of Santa Cruz", "Los Fundadores." Santa Cruz, California: Paper Vision Press, 1980, pp. xi-xvi [Out of Print, 2005].

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INTRODUCTION

I FIRST CAME ACROSS Leon Rowland's five slim books ten years ago while looking for secondary material on the history of Santa Cruz County. The books occupied less than three inches of my bookshelf, and several of them had rust spots where their bindings had been stapled. The absence of footnotes and bibliographies combined with the fact that all but one had been privately published led me to conclude that the books were vanity publications by a local antiquarian. I set them aside and continued my search for reliable source books on the history of Santa Cruz.

When Margaret Koch's *Santa Cruz County: Parade of the Past* was first published in 1973, I was delighted to have a history of the County with footnotes. But, when following Margaret's citations back into her bibliography, I found that often her source was one of those five skinny books by Leon Rowland which I had put in an unfrequented corner of my bookshelf. My skepticism spread and I dutifully continued my own research, reading nineteenth-century Santa Cruz County newspapers and searching through County records. The staples in the Rowland books rusted further.

I refused to look at Rowland's *The Story of Old Soquel* when Carolyn Swift and I were working on *From Soquel Landing to Capitola-by-the-Sea* for fear that I would be influenced by questionable material. After our book was completed, however, I sneaked a peak at Rowland's Soquel book – my heart sank. Much of the factual material and many of the dates and names had a familiar ring, and I matched newspaper references with Leon time and again. He had been through all the archival material too, but had failed to leave a map of his footprints in the form of footnotes.

I reread each of the five volumes with increasing respect, but my training in historiography was difficult to overcome. Obviously, Leon Rowland had done a great deal of research, but there was much information in his books that was beyond the archives and the newspapers. Where did he get his material, I pondered.

Then, in the fall of 1979, a pile of musty cardboard boxes at the Special Collections Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz were made available to the public. Leon Rowland's wife Jeannette had willed all of Leon's files and scrapbooks about Santa Cruz to the University Library, and as my hands ran through the cross-indexed card files that Leon had kept, much of my skepticism fell away. Leon had used not only the local newspapers but also court records, deeds and Spanish- and Mexican-period documents. The files were the base of the iceberg; Leon Rowland had put forth for public scrutiny only the facts about which he was certain. If he had any doubts, the information stayed in his files with notations about the conflicting reports. What was finally published was the end result of an elaborate distilling process – no analysis, no speculation, just the straight, pure truth as Leon saw it.

Who was this compulsive researcher who devised the masterful filing system and wrote sentences as spare as telegrams? Born in Sac City, Iowa, in 1884, Leon was by training and profession a newspaperman. After jobs with several newspapers in the Pacific Northwest and a few years with the Associated Press in San Francisco, Leon and Jeannette moved to Santa Cruz in 1929 where he worked as a newspaperman until his death in 1952. For the first decade he worked with the Santa Cruz *Evening News*, going to the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* when it absorbed the *Evening News* in 1941. He was city editor at the *Sentinel* when he died at age sixty-seven. His collected historical writings are best understood against this background, for though historical and genealogical research occupied his spare time, his professional training influenced everything he wrote.

Leon Rowland's writing style is terse – staccato. The abbreviated line of thought sometimes broadens into descriptive narrative, but more often the dates, names and places line up like fence posts. Some of those who knew him say that Leon had a life-long desire to write novels, to expand his writing style, but was unable to do so. What he finally published was a set of books filled with vignettes – little pieces carefully measured and drawn but presented without interpretation and analysis. The ingredients for richer characterizations and broad analysis are in his files, but apparently his newspaper training would not permit him to venture beyond the Who, What, When and Where. Nor did he inject his personal opinion into his writing. There are few clues in his books about his own feelings, and he rarely took sides in the controversies he described. Leon Rowland always tried to be objective and down-the-middle. His primary purpose was to write as best he could the facts of Santa Cruz's early development.

This objectivity made Leon Rowland one of the first local historians to write about Santa Cruz County's past without an ulterior motive. All the histories of the County published before 1940 had purposes beyond the historical, from the sale of real estate to the fabrication of reputations. The first accounts of the area were published in the 1860's and consisted mainly of personal accounts of early pioneers. Thomas Farnham's journals, for example, promoted the Yankee settlers of the 1840's and belittled their Spanish-speaking precursors. While Isaac Graham was eulogized by Farnham, the Mexicans were portrayed as shiftless and untrustworthy.

In 1879 and 1892 two subscription histories were published about Santa Cruz County, the first by the Wallace W. Elliot Company (*History of Santa Cruz County, California*), and the second compiled by Edward S. Harrison (*History of Santa Cruz County*). The biographies included in both books most often reflected the number of pre-publication subscriptions bought by the subjects rather than their actual accomplishments. Since the

Spanish-speaking and their descendents did not generally subscribe to these publications, they were mentioned infrequently. In the later 1890's, history-by-subscription gave way to history-to-sell-real-estate when the Southern California land boom caught hold in Santa Cruz County, resulting in the publication of Phil Francis' *Beautiful Santa Cruz County* in 1896.

After World War II, when Santa Cruz readers were a generation removed from the pioneers, local newspapers began to print historical articles about the area's settlement. Curiosity about local origins, place names, community histories and pioneer biographies was satisfied by F. W. Atkinson in Watsonville and Ernest Otto, Preston Sawyer and Rowland in Santa Cruz. By 1932 this curiosity grew into a modest boom in interest about the Spanish period, a boom represented in Santa Cruz by the erection of the scaled-down Mission Santa Cruz replica and the publication of *Story of the Mission Santa Cruz* by Henry Albert Van Coenen Torchiana a year later.

Not content with the tantalizing but sparse references to Santa Cruz in the journals of the Spanish explorers which were being translated by historian Herbert Bolton, Leon taught himself to read Spanish, and his search for Spanish-language sources became an obsession. He spent his vacations roaming through archives in Mexico, Santa Barbara, Monterey and Berkeley seeking documents pertaining to the star-crossed Mission Santa Cruz and neighboring Villa de Branciforte. His personal files are replete with not only Spanish-language documents but also lengthy genealogies of the early Spanish and Mexican pioneers. Not surprisingly, the Spanish and Mexican periods are the most fully developed in both Leon Rowland's files and his published works.

Leon broke a century-old pattern of neglect when he wrote extensively and respectfully about the Spanish-speaking pioneers in Santa Cruz County. He continued another tradition, however, when he excluded the story of the poor relations that existed between Yankee pioneers and Spanish-speaking residents of the County. The racism and animosity that accompanied the ethnic diversity of Santa Cruz were unpleasant facts not to be mentioned. Leon does mention the 1877 double lynching in Santa Cruz, but does not place it in the tradition of Mexican-Yankee conflict where it belongs. He reports the lynching in his facts-only style (failing to note that both men were Spanish-speaking) and closes the paragraph as if in a hurry to be done with the unfortunate event. That Santa Cruz mob action was a signal event in the history of Mexican-Yankee relations, however, as it marked the end of twenty-five years of mob violence against the Spanish-speaking in California; to see it in isolation is to miss its significance for both Santa Cruz and California.

At times Leon's tendency to slide over unpleasantness intruded into his genealogical work. Still in his card file is the fascinating account of Soledad Castro and her husband Rafael battling in and out of court until their eventual divorce in 1872. That story helps explain Rafael's taciturn character as well as his willingness to sell most of his property to Claus Speckles in 1872. Although the entire divorce account was in his notes, Leon chose not to speak ill of the pioneer California family of Aptos. Certainly this reluctance to speak directly of divorce is as much a reflection of the 1940's as it is of Leon Rowland.

And, as did most local historians writing in the 1940's (Ernest Otto is a delightful exception), Leon Rowland paid scant attention to the stories of pioneer communities whose members came from Asia. The Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos are not mentioned

in Leon's work, and few of his notes deal with them. For example, in his treatment of the 1894 Santa Cruz fire he failed to mention that Chinatown was destroyed along with the county court house, the Leonard building and the People's Bank. Perhaps had his research continued, he might have come to spend more time on the Asian immigrants, but it is clear that he was just getting into the 1890's period when he died in 1952.

Leon Rowland's work did not stop completely with his death. Leon's wife, Jeannette, kept the spirit of his work alive with her leadership in the Santa Cruz Historical Society and her painstaking index of Leon's bulging scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. Now and then her handwriting appears at the bottom of one of Leon's file cards, revealing her efforts to keep them up to date by noting the demise of historic buildings and people. To Jeannette must go credit both for the forbearance it must have taken to live with a compulsive researcher like Leon as well as for her contribution in making his files useful and available to local historians to follow. (Rowland's research materials not relating to Santa Cruz are at the Bancroft Library).

And, follow they will, for the Santa Cruz County of 1940 (population 45,000), which could not support the commercial publication of Leon Rowland's work, now has a population nearing 200,000 in 1980. Both natives and newcomers once again express a healthy curiosity about local history. Cabrillo College offers courses in local history and the University of California at Santa Cruz maintains a regional history project.

This collection of Leon Rowland's five books should not be seen as a comprehensive analytical history of Santa Cruz County – that history still needs to be written. Rather, it is a valuable research tool for both those fascinated by the area's history and those who research, analyze, and write local and regional history. We all should give Leon Rowland's fence posts a good shake before building on them. However, I believe that when the dust settles we will find Leon's work as sound as two decades of patience and devotion to the County's history could make them.

Recently, a student working on the Spanish-language document inventory at the University came to me to share his excitement in finding Marcelino Bravo living in Soquel thirty years before Martina Castro received the Soquel grant. Leon Rowland wrote of Marcelino in his *Story of Old Soquel* forty years ago! With an inward smile I informed the student that he might supplement his research by reading Leon Rowland's works. An excellent place to begin, I said. Good advice for us all.

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