

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

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Who Was Juan

Bandini ?

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In the annals of Old Town's history and its folk traditions, Juan Bandini has assumed an almost legendary presence.

With his grand home, ranchos, and extravagant ways, Bandini embodied the manners and bearing of a transplanted Spanish aristocrat to many early Americans. In later years and after his death he was often referred to as a Don, the signature title of Old World origins and rank. The American author Richard Henry Dana, who met Bandini in 1836, described him as:

"...accomplished and proud, and without any office or occupation, to lead the life of most young men of the better families—dissolute and extravagant when the means were at hand.... He had a slight and elegant figure, moved gracefully, and waltzed beautifully, spoke the best of

Castilian, with a pleasant and refined voice and accent, and had throughout the bearing of a man of high birth and figure."

But this Peruvian-born rancher and civic leader was more than just an elegantly dressed dandy who loved to dance and entertain. Having served as a delegate to the Mexican Congress, a member of Alta California's assembly (*diputación*) and town council (*ayuntamiento*), he was an important political figure. He hatched numerous plots against Mexican rule in his San Diego casa, including revolts against Governor Manuel Victoria in 1831 and Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado in 1836-1837. Although he initially welcomed U.S. military occupation and California statehood, he became increasingly critical of American rule, especially of the Land Act of 1851 that allowed claimants to challenge the validity of Mexican land grants in American courts.

Bandini's life, especially his later years, was anything but that of a "princely Don." American claimants challenged the validity of many of his Mexican grants in Southern California. Changes in Mexican law stripped him of title to his ranchos in Baja California.

Chronic illness, mounting debts, Indian unrest, and the anarchy unloosed by the Gold Rush overwhelmed him. His many letters to his American-born son-in-law, Abel Stearns, at this time often reflect a dire concern about his place and that of his family in a frontier society that had changed for the worse "Liberty," he wrote Stearns on June 7, 1847, "has become licentiousness. One sees in the towns nothing but drunkenness, gaming, sloth, and public manhandling of the opposite sex."

This dimension of his life has been forgotten by posterity. He is remembered, as one writer recently put it, as a "legendary renaissance *Californio*." His home in Old Town likewise became fused with the memory of him as a Don whose life embodied the traditions of Old Spain. Remodeled in 1930, 1947-1950, and 1978-1980, the Casa de Bandini was transformed into a luxurious Spanish colonial hacienda that in no way resembled either Bandini's original single-story adobe or the later two-story Cosmopolitan Hotel.

