Malibu 90265

Chapter 2: Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit

by Taylor Coffman

GLAMOROUS AND WORLD-RENOWNED it may now be, but Malibu through most of the nineteenth century was of humble, earthly, purely roughhewn character. "Cow counties" these coastal parts of southern California were called in the mid-1800s, areas much more rural and agrarian than those farther north, where the Gold Rush had opened the floodgates almost since the Mexican-American War ended in 1848—and where a newly Parisian city like San Francisco was a far cry from the dangerous place that Los Angeles often was in those rustic days. Indeed, one of Malibu's leading men of letters years ago, UCLA's Lawrence Clark Powell of Encinal Canyon, called the Angel City of the 1850s "the toughest town in the West, a cesspool of frontier scum." Larry Powell wrote those typically spirited words in 1969 for his column in *Westways* magazine, back when *Westways* was a cultural institution, a real credit to Southland letters and history. Powell had been the co-author a decade earlier of *The Malibu*, the esteemed W. W. Robinson having partnered with him.

In a more respectful vein than "cow counties" implies, California's vast southern acreage was a matrix of ranchos, Mexican land-grant ranchos in most instances, tracing back to the 1830s and '40s. A few of them, yet only a very few, went back still earlier as Spanish ranchos—or Spanish land *concessions*, to be more exact.

Malibu was one of these rarities through the last two decades of Spanish rule in California, a regime ending in 1821 when colonial Mexico won its independence from the mother country. In fact,

Malibu was never grandfathered into the newer land-grant rancho status under Mexican rule, a further example of its rarity among California real-estate holdings of the pastoral age. The exceptional and the unique have long been the way of things in this special corner of the world.

About 1802 a member of the Tapia family, a Spanish soldier named Jose Bartolome Tapia, had received for grazing use the Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit. That property's name recalled—in geographic sequence from east to west—the lands of the former but now scattered Gabrielino Indians, plus those of their equally former Chumash neighbors, and, for good measure, the toeholds of the latter-day Spanish, however few of them had actually hunkered down nearby. Modern places on the map like Topanga Canyon, Malibu Point, and Arroyo Sequit come quickly to mind when this old rancho name crops up. For the sake of perspective and comparison, another early Spanish parcel can be cited here: Rancho Nuestra Senora del Refugio in Santa Barbara County. At roughly 26,500 acres, it measured twice the size of Topanga Malibu Sequit's 13,300 acres.

Closer to home, Rancho Las Virgenes was partly akin to the Malibu property in its Spanish-become-Mexican status. Las Virgenes comprised about 17,700 acres and lay between the west end of Calabasas and Westlake Village, an area mostly dominated by today's town of Agoura Hills. Immediately to the west and southwest of Las Virgenes was the grant called El Rancho Conejo.

Some of the old Spanish concessions were indeed huge, vastly more so than their Mexican successors. Topanga Malibu Sequit was considered a gigantic, almost infinite domain, at least by the Tapias, whose presence in California traced back to the second Anza expedition, dated 1775-1776. One of the Anza campsites at that historic juncture had been close to Calabasas City Hall and Brent's Junction, where U.S. Highway 101 and Malibu Canyon Road now intersect, with

the main road formerly being known as the Ventura-Hollywood route. Although the Anza trail crossed the region a few miles north of greater Malibu (heading across the future Las Virgenes tract to present-day Thousand Oaks), Bartolo Tapia may have seen enough of the countryside lying toward the coast, south of Brent's Junction, to realize how fine a grazing parcel it could be someday. But whether he or others penetrated boulder-strewn Malibu Gorge to reach the Pacific itself as early as the Anza period is a question worth debating; some historians claim they did. If so, it would surely have been a grueling trip, not soon to be forgotten. Today, lonesome and mysterious Rindge Dam lies athwart the imagined route.

The indispensable W. W. Robinson, whose co-authorship with Larry Powell of *The Malibu* was dated 1958, offered a choice passage in that book about Bartolo Tapia, one that gives the most plausible glimpse to be found anywhere. *The Malibu* has in many ways proved unsurpassable, a book with no peer:

> There came a time, perhaps on a boat trip north along the coast [or rather west], when Bartolo first saw the curving beach at the mouth of Malibu Creek, the good stream of fresh water that met the ocean, the wide flat area suitable for crops and cattle, the possibility of having a private port of entry for the importing of goods to sell in the Pueblo [of Los Angeles], together with the seclusion produced by the towering Santa Monica Mountains. He made application for the Malibu to the commander of the military garrison in Santa Barbara, for the land was under Santa Barbara's jurisdiction.

Indeed it was, those being Spanish times, before Mexico gained its independence and imposed new rules and redrew some of colonial California's internal, administrative boundaries. In any event, Robinson, dean of rancho historians in his day (he died in 1972), added that for Senor Tapia "the approach [from Los Angeles] was by boat or on horseback, with muletrains bringing in supplies, for there were no roads."

No survey of the Tapias' original grazing concession for Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit ever surfaced. That was the norm, as Robinson often explained in his rancho writings. Records and archives in California's formative days were either minimal or nonexistent. It follows that the Spaniards' description of their rancho boundaries, dating from the Tapia family's sale of the property in 1848, was vague and wishful. The holdings, said those old-timers, ran as far up the coast as the Ventura River, past the Oxnard Plain and almost fifty miles from the family's adobe, which the Tapias had built behind Malibu Lagoon. To them, greater Malibu was hundreds of square miles larger than a road like Mulholland Drive could ever encompass.

With Malibu Gorge being as forbidding as it is, the Tapias favored the coastal side of the mountains. The area synonymous with today's Malibu Creek State Park must have been strictly a "back forty." Any cattle and horses kept there were in a bucolic world all their own, walled off from the coast and, only now and then, rounded up with much hardship. Come shipment time, the livestock was herded to Port Hueneme, more than thirty miles away and marked by a bone-jarring trip around the north side of Conejo Mountain. Better that, at least, than taking the animals over Calabasas Grade and all the way down to the San Pedro area, a much longer trip. That roundabout trip would have been the only alternative.

These ranching details are tangential, though, secondary to larger concerns such as land title and ownership. What could the Tapias have meant by "Sierra Mayor" (as in the "larger mountain range") when they specified that salient feature as their northern boundary? Did they mean the Santa Monicas alone? Or were they speaking of summits even farther north, closer to the Santa Clara River, the pathway of El Camino Real from Mission San Fernando to the next outpost in the chain, many miles away in Ventura? Historians differ on this point as well.

Two owners after the Tapias, under an Irishman named Matthew Keller, Rancho Malibu came into more realistic focus. It was then, in the late 1850s, that Keller began walking the property through the title-clearing paces that the U.S. Land Commission had begun requiring soon after the Gold Rush started. Gone was the Ventura River in favor of a more sensible "point called Mugu on the northwest" (Vizcaino's Point Conversion of 1602 had already been forgotten and will always be obscure). All the same, the northern boundary of Rancho Malibu remained too far-flung, too ambitious and sprawling until the U.S. Government reined it in by well over half the Spanish "league" acreage that Matthew Keller was gunning for. A single league (traditionally meaning a square league) measured roughly 2.3 miles per side, or not quite 1,500 acres per unit.

What resulted from this tug-of-war between Keller and the Land Commission was a conspicuously elongated parcel, akin to the Refugio grant along the outer Santa Barbara coast. By those updated means did Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit set the geographic tone for latter-day Malibu, right through its gaining of cityhood in 1991: namely, very long and narrow. The rancho measured not quite nineteen miles from its eastern to western boundary. Or to be more exact, from Las Flores Canyon (by the old Las Flores Inn and later the Sea Lion Restaurant, now Duke's Malibu) all the way out to the county line, just west of Arroyo Sequit. Make that Secos, as its rocky surf spot has been better known since the late 1950s.

But why so narrow? This reflected how the Spanish and later Mexican grant properties were allotted. As a rule they encompassed acreage suitable for stock grazing only, hence the odd configuration of many a grant. They usually (but not always) avoided mountainous land. For Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, that meant focusing on the lower, accessible reaches fronting the Santa Monicas, comprising the marine terraces and other slopes below the higher summits. The die

was thus cast for the coastal side of greater Malibu to sprawl and stretch the way it still does. It's surprising, meanwhile, that the grant as patented didn't run another mile or so west, as far as Little Sycamore Canyon (along Yerba Buena Road, next to Neptune's Net). The lower hills near the surf spots called Staircase and County Line were as well-suited to grazing as was the acreage back toward Trancas and Zuma.

At any rate, the jostling of Matthew Keller's claim—finally patented in 1872, a process that typically took many years—yielded a substantial public domain for greater Malibu. Some of these public acres, yet to be claimed, were known by the Spanish term *sobrante,* still encountered in historical data on grants and other lands of long ago. In any case, the decreeing of such tracts of non-grant acreage in coastal California has always been crucial in promoting modern settlement. But certain properties like the Irvine Ranch in Orange County long resisted subdivision. In a similar vein, witness how sacrosanct the Bixby-Hollister ranchlands have remained in Santa Barbara County. Farther north there's the Hearst Ranch in San Luis Obispo County, its kingly 48,800 land-grant acres known as Rancho Piedra Blanca since Mexican times (and to which the Hearsts have continually added other parcels). In Malibu the public-lands factor from as far back as Matthew Keller insured the prospect of outback sod-busting in the wake of President Lincoln's Homestead Act, dated 1862. This was especially true in the wild northwest interior up toward Boney Ridge.

Keller died not quite ten years after his prime coastal acreage was "proved" and then patented. His son sold the rancho in 1892, the property having boasted an unprecedented clear title by then for twenty years. The name Keller's Shelter still appears on mariners' charts and other maps, denoting the protected cove immediately east of Malibu Point, the sandy curve of beach running toward the pier.

Thus is one of Malibu's pioneers honored, with Tapia County Park doing the same along Malibu Canyon Road near Mulholland Highway, a few miles north of the Tapias' beachside home. Both names, however, Keller and Tapia, have long been eclipsed by one that's more synonymous with Malibu than any other: Rindge, as the next chapter will show.

The name of the historic ranch itself, Rancho Topanga Malibu Sequit, had become simply *the Rancho Malibu* (or even just *Rancho Malibu*) by the late 1800s. It has long since been known by a still briefer though somewhat puzzling version: *the Malibu*. Rendered this way, the name recalls *the Rancho Malibu*, minus the "Rancho" part. The main words can be further modernized as *the Malibu Ranch*, an inverted though surely less graceful form. *The Malibu* is more directly beholden to "Rancho" having been dropped from the older version, less so to the newer name having dispensed with "Ranch." Both names have their adherents, the stakes being nothing like those surrounding the frowned-upon use of *Frisco* to mean San Francisco.

In fact, it's quite acceptable simply to say *the Bu*, and not just with regard to the renowned surf spot. The dean of local realtors, the octogenarian Louis Busch (who surfed at Malibu Point in the palmy days), has a license plate on his Buick that captures the spirit perfectly: LOU BU.