

The Romies – The First Family of Pebble Beach

by Neal Hotelling

The first family to call Pebble Beach home were the Romies, a family of German emigrants near the end of California's Mexican era. In 1846, just months before the landing of Commodore Sloat at Monterey, John (or as he was then known, Juan) Romie purchased the 4,426.46 acre El Pescadero Rancho from Maria del Carmen Garcia, widow of the original grantee, Fabian Barretto. Barretto received the grant in 1836 and died in 1841. The childless, Maria remarried in 1844 to Juan Madriaga and made her home in Monterey. Having no use for the large Rancho, she happily sold it to the Romies for \$500.



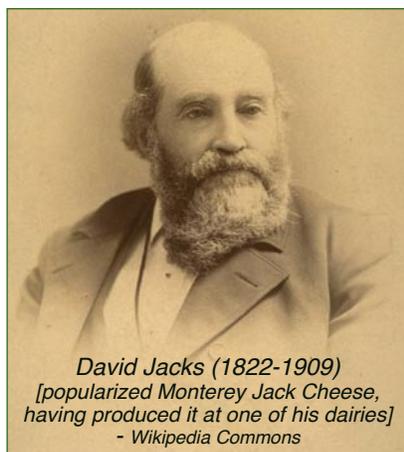
*The John Romie and Jacks Family headstones
- City of Monterey Cementerio El Encinal*

John and his wife Mary did not come directly to Monterey. They left Germany in 1838 with their three young children: Ernest (8), Anita (2) and Charles (1). Their first home in the new world was at Oaxaca in southern Mexico, where they quickly assimilated, becoming known as Juan and Maria. In June 1839, they gave birth to a daughter and provided her with a very Spanish name, Maria Christina Soledad Romie. They left southern Mexico and arrived at Santa Barbara in 1841 and later moved to Monterey, where their son Pablo (Paul) was born in 1843. The growing family purchased the Rancho on March 20, 1846, and from most reports built a home near Stillwater Cove. The house was located near today's fourth fairway, with barns across the creek bed near today's 16th green. It is interesting to note that on the 1850 Census, the Romies had a boarder – a 26-year-old store

clerk from Scotland named David Jacks; within the decade, a romance would bloom between Jacks and the young Maria Christina Romie.

The family lived there for several years, but when gold fever hit California in 1848, John Romie was not immune. He headed up to the Sierras to seek his fortune. He died near Placerville of a heart attack on March 21, 1849. Mary and the children lived on the Rancho for a while longer, but eventually moved. The Rancho was sold in an 1853 probate sale for \$4,400 (roughly one dollar per acre) to John C. Gore, a widower from Massachusetts. He raised his two sons on the Rancho for the next six years.

The Romies didn't go far. Ernest, a carpenter and Charles, a farmer had moved south to San Luis Obispo. Charles and his friend, Barkley Clements, leased some land on the coast from the Avila family. They built Cave Landing about a mile south of the current town of Avila. The wharf, below a rocky promontory with a warehouse and a derrick type elevator, could raise both people and freight from the landing to where a stage line could take them into the village. After a few years, the partners sold their interests. Charles moved back to Monterey County in the 1860s.



*David Jacks (1822-1909)
[popularized Monterey Jack Cheese,
having produced it at one of his dairies]
- Wikipedia Commons*

On the 1860 Census, Mary was living in Santa Clara with her two youngest children, but that same year, Maria Christina married David Jacks and moved back to Monterey. Jacks was becoming an infamous land baron. In one of his most notorious land deals

the year before, he purchased, at a legally noticed public auction, the nearly 30 thousand acres of “pueblo lands” that comprised the city of Monterey – and did so for just over \$1,000.

In 1860, the Gores returned to Massachusetts so the home-schooled boys could attend college. Gore retained an agent and put the Rancho on the market for \$10,000 or trade of equal value. Jacks was apparently not in the position to buy the Rancho then. Instead, New York lawyer (and later California Senator) Edward Tompkins, traded his ranch in Binghamton, NY for the Rancho and moved west. After examining the Tompkins ranch, Gore objected and determined to cancel the trade arranged through his agent. Rather than deal with Gore, Tompkins sold the Rancho to Jacks in 1862 for \$10,000 – in a sense, putting it back with the Romie family for the next 18 years, until Jacks sold it in 1880 to the Pacific Improvement Company.

Rather than move back into the home they had known a decade earlier, Maria Christina and David Jacks built a large home in Monterey and had five children. They made millions in Monterey County land deals; eventually their children, who had no children, sold it off or donated some for park lands, like Jacks Peak and Jacks Park.

By 1870, Ernest was back in Monterey working at the Elkins Store; Paul was working as a gardener in Monterey and looking after their mother; and Charles was amassing ranchland near Soledad, making his living raising cattle. In the 1889 promotional booklet, “Monterey County: its general features, resources, attractions, and inducements to investors and home seekers,” Charles is recorded as an “essential feature” to the Soledad area.

“A sketch of Soledad without a mention of Charley Romie would be like a play of Hamlet minus the ghost. Not that there is anything ghostly about Mr. Romie’s two hundred pounds avoirdupois, but that he is an essential feature of the place, owning large property interests in the surrounding country, and having unbounded faith in the future of Monterey County. He is a royal entertainer and the prince of good fellows.”

Paul married Harriet Buell in 1878 and went into farming around Soledad, perhaps with his older brother. Ernest was superintendent of a ranch around Castroville by 1880, and their mother, age 78, was then living comfortably within the Jacks household.

Though he never married, Charles apparently had a happy life in the Salinas Valley, served as a county supervisor, and like his more infamous brother-in-law, was able to list his occupation as Capitalist on the 1900 Census. He died at the Abbott Hotel in Salinas on January 5, 1904. He is perhaps best remembered in local history as the person for whom the short-lived Fort Romie was named. In 1897, Romie sold 520 acres to the Salvation Army and helped create a community that would allow the poor to be self-sufficient on under utilized land. The January 1898 San Francisco Chronicle reported the Army’s premise as: “waste labor should be placed on waste land by the aid of waste capital. The uniting of this trinity of wastes would solve the great problem of labor.”

Infrastructure including a post office, schoolhouse, a general store, an assembly hall and an \$8,000 irrigation plant was built in late 1897; 75 residents moved into 32 homes in January. By July, they had 225 acres under cultivation in a variety of crops and were building a warehouse. Fort Romie was deemed a model project for planning others, but within a year it had failed. An attempt to revive it in the early 1900s also failed, and Fort Romie is relegated to the history books. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the first family of Pebble Beach made its mark in the development of Monterey County. 🌿

