

Local News

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Legacy of Santa Cruz lives on

Sheep, suits recalled by Pier Gherini

By Hillary Hauser
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"Let me tell you about those rams — they'd rather fight than do anything else," said Pier Gherini Sr.

Remembering his days of running a sheep ranch on the east end of Santa Cruz Island, Gherini looked out over the Santa Barbara Channel from his living room window and said an important part of keeping sheep was to separate the rams.

"Damn, did they like to fight," he said.

Family battle

Gherini also talked about another battle: The 20-year fight his relatives waged over the island, from 1911 to 1931.

At 74 and retired, Gherini lives in the home on the Riviera he has occupied for 35 years. Although he's battled a few health problems, he has a sharp memory for details and documents.

Like his father, Ambrose Gherini, Pier is a lawyer, as is his son, John, 40.

The east end (6,264 acres) of Santa Cruz, the largest of the Channel Islands, is owned by the Gherinis. Dr. Carey Stanton and the Nature Conservancy own the remaining 54,381 acres.

Tumultuous history

The beginning of the island's sometimes tumultuous legal history came in 1869 — the year Pier Gherini's great-grandfather, Justinian Caire, bought the island.

After Caire died in 1897, the island continued as he had built it — a working sheep ranch that occupied the entire island.

The main ranch (where Stanton has lived since he moved onto the island in 1957) served as headquarters for island operations, and the outer sheep stations continued at Scorpion Anchorage and Smugglers Cove.

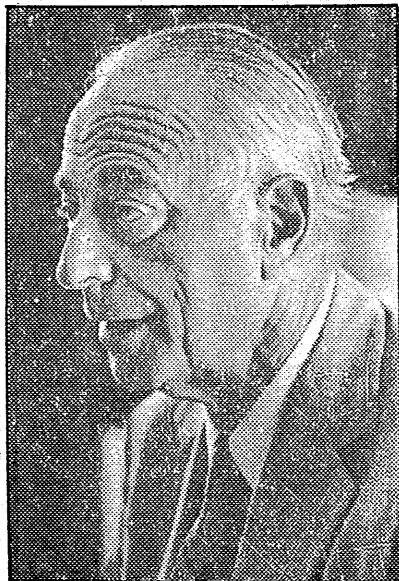
Mother married vintner

Meanwhile, one of Caire's daughters, Amelia, had married P.C. Rossi, a founder of



News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

Gherini family ranch overlooks Scorpion Anchorage on Santa Cruz Island.



Pier Gherini Sr.

Ran sheep ranch

Italian Swiss Colony Wines. Maria Rossi was one of the 14 children resulting from that union.

Rossi married Ambrose Gherini, a San Francisco lawyer.

One year before she gave birth to Pier Gherini in 1912, Rossi found herself in a battle over Santa Cruz Island with some of the Caire family members.

It was discovered that the

Santa Cruz Island Corp. had dissolved, and some Caire family members wanted their piece of the island.

'Poof — tht's it'

"My dad told my grandfather, 'I can't believe it, they've forgotten to renew the charter, the corporation is dead,'" Gherini said. "These days, you form a corporation and it's for life. Not then — 50 years and poof, that's it."

Gherini said his childhood on the island was "governed by that case." He was just born when it started and 20 years old by the time it was settled.

In 1937, the Caire descendants sold their share of the island to Edwin L. Stanton of Laguna Beach, for \$750,000.

Ambrose and Maria Gherini, however, retained the east end of the island. Their children — Pier, his brother Francis and two sisters, Marie "Dini" and Ilda — took over the sheep ranching operation there.

'My dad was fed up'

"My dad was fed up," Gherini said. "He spent time on the island, but because of that case, it wasn't very satisfactory for him. He told my brother (Francis) and me that he would expect us to take charge. We had to learn what the job was all about."

Gherini, who eventually became a lawyer himself, spent many summer months on the island. Each summer, he would take his four children — Pier Jr. "Pete," John, Tom and Elena — across the channel to work on the ranch.

"There were a lot of problems," Gherini said. "We were told by people who knew a hell of a lot more than we did that there was a lot of fencing that needed to be done. That's all we did for several years — build fences."

Family ran ranch

For the next 40 years, the Gherini family managed to keep things going with hired managers. Every night about 6 p.m., Gherini would radio his ranch manager, keeping a log of all his calls.

In 1984, the sheep were removed from the east end of island by a hunting program initiated by the Gherinis, an ecological move to save the island's protective vegetation.

Peace has been shattered again on Santa Cruz, however, as legal clouds appear on the horizon.

National park created

In 1980, Rep. Robert Lagomarsino, R-Santa Barbara-

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'It will be there after we're gone'

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Ventura, authored legislation creating the Channel Islands National Park. The bill authorized acquisition of private island holdings, "through condemnation if necessary."

That part was OK with Gherini, who accepted the action as something bound to happen. However, he said he is mystified by a lack of action since the passage of the legislation.

The legislation stipulated that the federal government had to acquire the land "expeditiously" — and it is now six years later, Gherini said.

Under the terms of the Channel Islands National Park legislation, Santa Rosa Island is to be acquired first (and that island is nearing final stages of acquisition, with transfer of title expected by the end of 1986).

There is \$33.3 million in federal funds available to the National Park Service for the acquisition of island property. The bulk of these funds will go toward Santa Rosa.

In awkward position

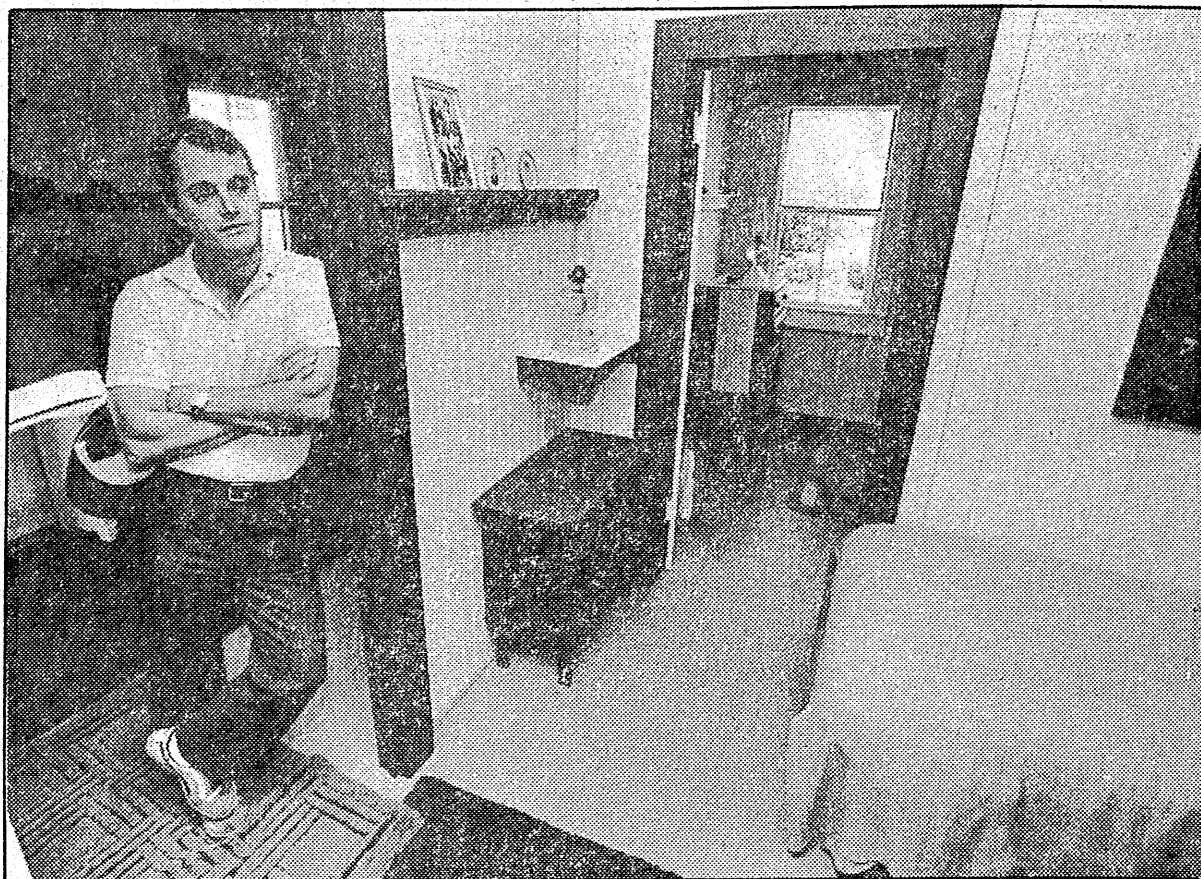
The Gherinis feel they are placed in an awkward position because of the delay. Furthermore, additional funds for the purchase of the Gherini property may be delayed by the uncertainty of Gramm-Rudman belt-tightening, said John Gherini, who oversees the legal business of the island for the family.

Another cloud of uncertainty that has hovered over island transactions has been a claim by a local Chumash Indian that Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa are in the hands of the wrong people.

In 1984, Chunie Frances Herrera filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Los Angeles that Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa were never transferred to the state in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848.

Indian appeal continues

That court ruled in favor of the landowners, the state and the National Park Service in 1985, but the case was appealed. In April 1986, the federal appeals court ruled that



News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

John Gherini looks at the refurbished bunk house at Scorpion Anchorage.

the Indians lost their chance to claim the land 133 years ago, when they failed to present a claim to a U.S. commission created after the Mexican War.

The issue has been re-appealed to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. As long as the issue remains before the courts, the transfer of island titles is stalled.

Another issue for the island is a devaluation of their land because of action taken by the state Coastal Commission, which said there can be no cluster or oil development on Santa Rosa or Santa Cruz.

In January 1980, about the same time the legislation passed requiring the Gherinis to sell their property, Santa Barbara County completed its coastal land use plan and submitted it to the Coastal Commission.

The commission refused certification of the county plan because it did not satisfy the policies of the California

Coastal Act in relation to the Channel Islands.

Concern over development

Specifically, it was concerned about potential development on Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz.

The commission certified only part of the plan, and left the issues of the islands unresolved.

At a time appraisals are being made of their property, a potential downzoning and resultant devaluation does not sit well with the Gherinis.

In 1981, they filed a lawsuit against the Coastal Commission in Los Angeles Superior Court.

Frustrating situation

"It's frustrating to say the least," John Gherini said. "First, we are told the land would be acquired expeditiously. Then the appraisal process goes on for six years, with the Coastal Commission trying to downzone the property. Then, the Indian lawsuit. I

don't have a file on this, I have boxes."

Pier Gherini Sr. leaves the legal and technical aspects of the island to his son, John, and these days, he spends his time translating the work diaries of Santa Cruz.

Dating from 1885, the diaries are in Italian — a language Gherini studied at UC Berkeley. He writes the English translation on a legal pad.

Three of his children are nearby — Pier Jr., 44, a businessman and vice president of Westpac Shelter Corp.; John, 40, whose legal practice is in town; and Elena, 41, who lives in Goleta. Tom, 35, works for a high-technology firm in the San Francisco Bay area.

His wife, the former Margaret Whelan, died in 1975.

Gherini looked out a window, toward the channel.

"It's pointless to speculate what you or I would do," he said. "But time marches on. You can rest assured the island will be there long after you and I are gone."