Cornelius Jensen: One of California's First Danes

Harlan Pedersen
Sixty miles east of Los Angeles, along the Santa Ana River near the community of Robidoux, lies the little Flabob Airport. Because of its difficult approach, it's a challenge to pilots in training and a good place to land for Sunday lunch, particularly on a clear winter's day with the snow-capped San Bernardinos off to the north. One-half mile off the departing end of the Flabob runway, one views a familiar Southern California sight; the inevitable encroachment of more housing tracts. As one of those pilots in training on a bright Sunday morning, I found my curiosity aroused when my attention focused on the middle of one of these tracts. There, and only clearly evident from the air, stood a cleared field of about 40 acres with farm buildings in the very center,
defying the urban onslaught. The next excursion to and departure from Flabob had me hold to a 500 ft. elevation for a better look at the old structures in the field, which appeared to be a large house, barn and accessory buildings looking somewhat out of place, for they were built of red bricks, unheard of for old ranches in this part of the world.

Less than a year after this encounter, the Danish American Heritage Society was informed of a Danish sea captain named Cornelius Jensen, who in the mid-1800s settled on a ranch in the Riverside area, built a Danish style house, and married a Spanish lady who subsequently bore him 12 children. Geographically, I was a logical choice to check on what they felt might be an interesting story. Curious to find out if the Jensen ranch and the buildings I had observed from the air were the same, I phoned Riverside County’s Historian, Steven Becker, who quickly confirmed that these buildings were indeed the old Jensen Ranch and that he would be happy to arrange a tour during my next weekend flight to Flabob. After many trips to the old ranch...
and meetings with Steven Becker and the most knowledgeable Mary Haggland, Chairman of the Jensen-Alvarado Ranch Associates, a fascinating story of one of California's first Danes began to evolve.

It begins in 1814 in the village of Vesterland, Island of Sylt, Denmark, with the birth of Cornelius Jensen. Young Cornelius attended school in Vesterland, and at the age of 14 sailed the inter-island and coastal trades on German ships out of Kiel and Hamburg. Later, as First Mate, Jensen extended his sailing to other European ports and finally in 1844 to the Americas and the coveted trip around the Horn to the west coast of Alta, California where he would trade for hides and tallow.

Upon returning to Germany, word of gold in California prompted homeport merchants to form consortiums by finding a suitable cargo vessel (probably expendable), loading her with mining supplies, and with an experienced crew, sending them to California with the hope of a handsome return on their investments. Jensen, now 34 years old with master papers and deep-water experience and speaking fluent German, some English and of course Danish, was selected to Captain the small cargo vessel.

Childhood home of Cornelius Jensen.
In the late fall of 1848, with the holds filled with mining supplies and a similar deck cargo secured, Capt. Jensen and his crew sailed for California. After the usual long month's running with the wind as far south to the Madeiras, they crossed the Atlantic. Replenishing with fresh food and water in Buenos Aires, Capt. Jensen continued south around the Horn, then north and west to pick up the trades to California.

After more than six months enroute, cargo intact, he sighted the Faralons and entered the harbor of Yerba Buena (San Francisco). Capt. Jensen tied up along the hundreds of ships abandoned by crews who had raced for the gold fields in central California. Jensen arranged to sell one half of his cargo, sending the proceeds to the German consortium, and paying off his crew, who by now had also elected to leave their ship to join the gold seekers. With crew gone and a ship probably not sea-worthy for a return to Europe, Capt. Jensen weighed the alternatives; a lonely life at sea or a new
adventure and a new beginning in California. Loading the balance of his cargo of mining supplies on ox-drawn carettas, Jensen made his way along the Sacramento River to a landing west of Sutters fort where he set up a mining equipment store.

Before the gold rush, the prevailing economic activity for California had been cattle ranching, mainly supplying the high demand for hides and tallow at $3/head to the east coast and European markets. Now, however, the market was meat for the miners and going for up to $50/head. Among the many ranchers who drove their herds north to the gold country were Ygnacio Alvarado and Ygnacio Palomares from Southern California, both of whom corraled their herds near the Jensen store. Sales were brisk for both the Captain and the ranchers, and by years end most of the mining supplies and cattle were sold. After the final sales were completed, Alvarado, who had by now taught Jensen Spanish and had become his friend, invited him to come south. The future was cattle, not gold; the Treaty of Guadalupe, ceding Alta California to the United States from Mexico, had now been completed and the opportunities for a
young and ambitious Scandinavian in California were endless.

Arriving in Southern California, the fair and blue-eyed Captain was immediately accepted by the Spanish ranch families who had settled in the area east of the San Gabriel Mission and El Pueblo de Los Angeles. Captain Jensen first established a General Store in Agua Mansa near the Santa Ana River and was from the very first welcomed by all of the ranchers. But it was to the home of Don Francisco Alvarado that he was especially drawn because he had fallen in love with the eldest daughter, sixteen year old beautiful Mercedes. It was customary that proposals for marriage be presented in Spanish to the father of the proposed bride. Upon receipt of Capt. Jensen’s proposal, Don Alvarado exclaimed with pride, “You honor my house and you have my consent.” The grand wedding fiesta, lasting many days, was held at the home of Don Louis Robidoux and his wife Guadalupe Garcia.

Cornelius and Mercedes settled in an adobe addition to the store in Agua Mansa, where eight of their children were
born: Jose, Concepcion, Tomassa, Francisca, Cornelius, Erolinda, Henry and Mary. The Jensen's store prospered so that by 1865 they were able to buy ranch lands to the east belonging to Don Louis Robidoux; 300 prime acres near the Santa Ana River and a part of the original Rancho Jurupa. In 1870, Don Cornelio (as he was now called) completed their new and unique home which he built to resemble his childhood home in Denmark.

By now over twenty years had passed since the young Captain had left his Danish home. He loved his adopted country, but longed for the gentleness of Denmark, her seasons, landscape and quiet way of life. It was for this reason that Cornelius satisfied this longing by building a home which would remind him of his homeland. With many rooms for his now large family, the house was richly decorated with tapestries, carpets, leather-covered furniture, porcelain and marble tables from New York and a piano from Boston shipped to him around the Horn. Built of kiln dried bricks with the help of Chinese laborers, the imposing house was completed in 1870, along with the addition of a large brick barn, winery, smoke-house and other structures.

To re-establish some connection with his past, Cornelius wrote to Denmark and invited Peter Peters, his
boyhood friend from Vesterland, to come west to be manager of the ranch. Peter accepted and would eventually marry Mercedes' younger sister. Fruit trees, berries, olives, wine grapes and a large garden surrounded the ranch compound. The prosperous ranch produced wine, olives, raisins, grain and cattle. Old letters from those years tell of Spanish sausage, hams and bacon hanging in the smoke house, and casks of wine and a giant wine and olive oil press in the winery. Hides, wool, and tallow were traded for items such as coffee, sugar, cloth material, tools and coal oil at the harbor of San Pedro, a two-day journey by wagon. Mercedes always had pinto beans on the stove and often prepared re-fried beans and tortillas and served wine to frequent visitors. Four more children were subsequently born in the new home: John, Helena, Robert and Charles. Helena and Charles died as infants.

The Jensen ranch was the center of activity in the area and many fiestas and weddings, were held there. Don Cornelio was highly regarded and trusted by the local people and acted as their banker and advisor. At times, large sums of cash and gold were stored in the Jensen attic for safe

Don and Dona

Mercedes Jensen circa 1913
keeping. He became Supervisor of the new Riverside County and served on the School Board for many years. Don Cornelio died at the age of 72. His passing was greatly mourned by his many friends and neighbors who bore his casket in a long funeral procession to the cemetery near Agua Mansa where he was finally laid to rest in 1886. Dona Mercedes lived on at the ranch until her death in 1914 at the age of 87.

Toward the end of Cornelius Jensen's life, Riverside County was experiencing the inevitable transformation of old Spanish Land Grants and Mexican holdings to urban growth. The railroad and influx of easterners demanded industry and new homes. Succeeding generations of Jensen children sold portions of the old ranch lands. The City of Riverside became the hub of commerce and the area around the ranch evolved into the community of Robidoux. Small homes and trailer parks have encroached upon the once pastoral fields. Gone are the orchards and vineyards, but a part of that old world of Cornelius and Mercedes Jensen remains to remind us of what once was a little part of Denmark, Spain and Mexico.
Recently we flew out to Flabob again and were pleased to see the progress made in restoring the old ranch. Relatives and community leaders, realizing that a part of history must be retained, formed the Jensen-Alvarado Ranch Associates to save the remaining 30 acres and buildings. Jensen heirs generously donated money and property. Grants from the Federal Parklands Acquisition Fund, the State of California Urban Parks Program and the County of Riverside, plus volunteers all contributed to the Jensen-Alvarado Ranch Historic Park. Work still continues with the restoration of the old house, winery and other buildings. Plans to extend the orchard and vineyard are in progress. Ultimately, this historic landmark will be made available for public touring.

Plan to fly into Flabob Airport next time you are in Southern California or if you are driving in the Riverside area, visited the Jensen-Alvarado Ranch Historic Park and experience the world of one of California's first Danes, Cornelius Jensen, from the little village called Vesterland on the Island of Sylt, Denmark.

For information on touring the ranch, write to the
CREDITS: Jensen-Alvarado Ranch Associates — Stephen Becker, Riverside County Historian, Executive Director; Mary Haggland, Chairman.

“Danske Pionerer in Riverside” — Author Unknown, Olga Strandvold Opfell, Translator.

Anne Pedersen — Research Assistant/Editor.