

Benjamin William Foxen

1796 - 1874

Benjamin William Foxen (aka "Don Julian" and "Guillermo Domingo"), an Englishman by birth and a Mexican by naturalization, was the earliest pioneer of the Sisquoc Valley. Born in Norwich County, Norfolk, England, in 1796, he joined the British Navy as a mere lad and went to sea. He later joined the merchant service and gradually worked his way up to first officer. He met Alpheus Basil "A.B." Thompson who was in need of a first officer on his ship which was engaged in the California-Boston hide and tallow trade. After working for Thompson for two years, Foxen went into business for himself. Using his own ship, he made his first visit to the San Francisco Bay in 1815, and Santa Barbara in 1818.

In 1828 Foxen completed rebuilding the schooner Goleta for William Dana who was captain of the Santa Barbara port. After launching the Goleta at the Atascadero Inlet in Goleta, Foxen captained the ship for several years, trading in Upper and Lower California. On a trip to San Isidro Ranch, Benjamin Foxen picked up a load of hides from Tomas Olivera who was superintendent of three mission ranches - La Purisima, Santa Ines and Santa Barbara. It was there that Foxen met Olivera's step daughter, Eduarda Osuna. Some time later Foxen visited Olivera again and asked for Eduarda's hand in marriage. Olivera informed Foxen that he could not allow Eduarda to marry a non-Catholic.

On August 4, 1830 Foxen was given the name "Domingo" by the Church, but the Indians called him "Don Julian". Guillermo Domingo Foxen, the Englishman who spoke very little Spanish and Eduarda Osuna, who spoke no English, were married at Mission Santa Barbara on May 26, 1831, by Padre Antonio Moreno.

In 1835, Foxen purchased land from Joseph Chapman in the area now called Burton's Mound. He enlarged Chapman's adobe and used the building as a hotel-sanitarium for sailors recovering from scurvy. Foxen was granted Rancho Tinaquaic on May 16, 1837, by Governor Alvarado, (8874.60 acres). It was rumored that Foxen could have had more land but refused saying, "the cattle would roam too far".

Don Julian experienced many hard years during the development of his ranch. He built a large adobe ranch house and barns to protect his cattle, horses and mules from wild animals and wild Indians. He built a blacksmith shop to make his own plows which were drawn by oxen to cultivate the flat land for grains and corn. In his harness shop, he made yokes for the oxen, and bridles, harnesses and other accessories. He built a flour mill, soap vats and possibly a tannery and winery.

In addition to his busy life on the rancho, Don Julian spent much time helping those who were ill. During his service in the British Navy and the Merchant Marines, he had acquired some knowledge of medicine, surgery and dentistry, and he could set broken bones.

When news reached the rancho that the United States was at war with Mexico, the northern portion of California had already been "taken" by the Americans under the leadership of Major John C. Fremont who was marching south and taking possession of every mission and pueblo. Because he was Mexican by adoption, Don Julian decided the wisest thing for him to do was remain neutral.

Fremont was successful in his conquest of California, but Don Julian's future was not as pleasant. The Californios felt he was a traitor to his adopted country Mexico, and with the help of Indians they raided his rancho and set fire to his fields. Later, while the family was attending mass at Santa Ines Mission, their home was set on fire. For safety, the family moved into the mission. In 1848 Don Julian returned to the rancho to gather up additional belongings, only to discover that the house had been ransacked. While he surveyed the damage, he was approached by three men and a woman. In an attempt to defend himself, Don Julian shot Augustin Davila.

Governor Mason appointed a special court consisting of two alcaldes; the trial was held September 4th and 5th, 1852, and Don Julian was sentenced to four years in jail. In consideration of his family and through the intercession of the mission padres, he was soon granted a pardon by the governor.

As the years passed, the rancho was rebuilt. New barns, a shop and corrals were constructed. The Foxen Ranch house was a stage stop from 1861 to 1865. Don Julian died in 1874; he was buried on a mesa near the ranch and, in 1881, his remains were moved to the San Ramon Chapel Cemetery.

*San Ramon Chapel Pioneers
Erlinda Pertusi Ontiveros*