

Creating home, creating legacies: how the Del Valles built Camulos

By Margie Brown-Coronel, February 19, 2018



This group portrait of Del Valle family members is on display in "[Many Voices, One Nation](#)." This photo of the Del Valle family and friends standing on the veranda steps of the family's home, Rancho Camulos, was taken most likely after a vesper, or evening, mass held at the ranch. Courtesy of Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History

In this family photograph, Ysabel Varela Del Valle stands prominently dressed in black, a Mexican custom of widowhood. She peers straight into the camera. From the last row (third from the left), she has a steady gaze and straight posture—proud of the family surrounding her. This image instantly captured my attention 12 years ago when I began researching the Del Valle family as a graduate student. I was curious about how this Spanish Mexican family succeeded in building the well-known California estate Rancho Camulos (now a National Historic Landmark about 50 miles northwest of Los Angeles) after the U.S.-Mexican War. My research led me through scores of family documents, letters, and artifacts, and revealed that women like Ysabel did much to ensure the family's prominence in California and to make a solid home for family and friends.



A center case in the museum's "[Many Voices, One Nation](#)" exhibition contains images and artifacts connected to the history of the Del Valle family and their home, Rancho Camulos.

By the time the photo was snapped in May 1886, California was under American rule, with rapidly developing industries and a booming population. The region's Spanish Mexican families, it might seem, faded into the history of California's Spanish past as relics of a bygone era. But to consider the story of Ysabel Varela Del Valle, alongside her family photograph and her items on display in *Many Voices, One Nation*, is to see that the Del Valles were very much engaged with California's development and their rancho flourished in the late 19th century under Ysabel's direction.

Ysabel Varela married Ygnacio Del Valle in 1851, just three years after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the agreement between the United States and Mexico that ended the U.S.–Mexican War and ensured Mexican residents of California the rights of citizenship (should they decide to stay) and land ownership. Even though the couple owned title to Rancho Camulos, their primary residence was in the plaza of Los Angeles, established in September 1781 by 44 settlers of mixed African, European, and indigenous descent. As a young woman, Ysabel enjoyed the bustling plaza where homes and hotels welcomed visitors, merchants sold goods, and weekly bullfights and dances entertained the community. She frequently gathered with neighbors, both Mexican and American, for special occasions such as weddings and baptisms. Her home was often a center of civic activity. The home was once a polling place and a boarding house for arriving Americans from the East, including the Daughters of Charity order. According to the family archive that includes scores of invitations and greeting cards, Ysabel was a well-respected and admired member of the plaza community.

Into the 1850s, the Los Angeles plaza continued to serve as the center of life for the Del Valles. Events they attended included Fourth of July dances and festivities celebrating George Washington's birthday. However, more Americans poured into Southern California looking for gold and opportunities, and the tenor of the plaza center grew tense as control shifted away from local Mexican leaders and instability overtook the streets. These changes, coupled with escalating threats to Mexican landholdings by squatters, travel promoters, and land speculators, forced the Del Valles to consider a new residence.

The couple chose to leave Ysabel's beloved home at the center of political, religious, and social life on the plaza and start anew at Rancho Camulos, located about 50 miles (or a daylong horse ride) from Los Angeles. With only a small adobe surrounded by a terrain devastated by years of drought, the rancho hardly provided an adequate home for the Del Valles' growing family. Ygnacio Del Valle confessed in an 1875 letter (archived at the Seaver Center for Western History Research) to his lifelong American friend, Joseph Lancaster Brent, "There is a lot of difference on this ranch from the time that you were here with me. . . even though I'm not an active man. . . we've had to live here permanently, it's been necessary to make some improvements." No doubt, Ysabel required the improvements Ygnacio referred to in his letter.

Heavily relying on Native American laborers, the first improvement made by the Del Valles was an expanded adobe, from four rooms to 10. The growing Del Valle family included not only the couple's two young children, but Ysabel brought along her mother and grandmother to live at Camulos. Also, in an effort to replicate the plaza atmosphere at Camulos, Ysabel requested a chapel to be constructed for daily mass and other important religious holidays. For example, Ysabel organized the baptism of all children living on and near Camulos, and each year the rancho hosted a May Day celebration with mass and festivities. Ysabel even enlisted different priests to give regular service. The large wooden cross at the back of the case and the heart with radiant gold design were from this private chapel.



This glass heart from the Catholic chapel at Rancho Camulos dates to late 1800s. It is currently on display in the exhibition, "Many Voices, One Nation." Loan from Rancho Camulos Museum

With all these improvements, Rancho Camulos had become a thriving enterprise and popular social hub of Southern California. At this midway point between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, Ysabel regularly hosted priests, merchants, and other travelers making their way to Central and Northern California. Upon Ygnacio's death in 1880, Ysabel assumed leadership of Camulos with assistance of her eldest children, Josefa and Reginaldo, as well as her stepson Juventino Del Valle. Like on the plaza, Ysabel once again assumed prominence since she served the area as a midwife and medic. With her son's assistance, Ysabel negotiated with the Southern Pacific Railroad to establish a train depot at Camulos, which furthered the rancho's success and prominence in the region. It is no wonder why Ysabel stood before the camera of 1886 with serious pride. She had witnessed great change in her Southern California community and showed great success in sustaining the values of family, religion, and community that she prized since her youth on the plaza of Los Angeles.



J. Y. Del Valle overlooking Rancho Camulos, late 1880s–early 1900s. Courtesy of Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History

As a result of Ysabel's decisions, Camulos stayed in the Del Valle family until 1924, a rare example of land titles carrying on from Mexican California. Subsequent generations have had the chance to experience Camulos. The rancho still operates as a family farm owned by the Rubel family and is open to the public as a museum and national landmark. In a story like so many featured in *Many Voices, One Nation*, Ysabel created a home in unpredictable circumstances and, thus, created a legacy that carried on.

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