An Old Friend

Under an archway of century old San Juan Capistrano sycamore trees, over a curvy, California cobblestone walkway and up four blush-red brick steps stands a worn adobe restaurant that welcomes customers into another era. The hand-painted, wooden sign, “El Adobe de Capistrano,” arching above the vine-covered brick pillars of the historic landmark, stands tall despite the town’s years of heat waves, earthquakes and population influxes. Serving authentic tacos and strong margaritas, El Adobe invites crowds in for dinner and even bigger multitudes in for weekend weddings. But El Adobe was not always so prominent.

On the morning of November 8, 1960, Vice President Richard Nixon’s car pulled into the dirt parking lot behind El Adobe. It had been a rough morning for the Vice President, as the election results, in which he was running as the Republican presidential candidate, had not yet been tallied. He had put so much into his campaign. And it all led up to today. He had paced the length of his suite at the Ambassador Hotel all morning and needed an escape from the Los Angeles crowd. He managed to finally turn off the television’s droning newscasters. *Nixon had Maine. Kennedy won Georgia. Nixon had it. Kennedy by a nose.*

No one could be sure.

Nixon closed his eyes, trying to block out the newscasters’ jumbled voices.

He needed a distraction. Opening his eyes, he took his military aid, Air Force Major James Hughes, aside. *Let’s take a drive.*

They settled in for the drive and pulled south onto the 5-freeway. He knew this drive well. Having grown up an hour out of LA, in Yorba Linda, Nixon could have driven himself more expertly around the area than Hughes. But he was too anxious to look for the familiar off ramps or road signs. He looked out past the window, contemplating his odds of winning and worrying over swing states.

They kept driving south, hoping to arrive in Mexico at a decent time. A little further into the drive, another noise broke into Nixon’s consciousness, pulling him out of his own thoughts: the pangs and growls of an empty stomach. He looked out the window, this time searching for a promising off ramp. The exit for Pacific Coast Highway loomed several miles ahead. The summers he had spent as a child down in Dana Point flooded in, temporarily distracting him from the impending election. Loving it so much there, he had taken his future wife, Pat, down to the Doheny Beach sand on one important evening and they walked holding hands until the sunset. Kneeling down on one knee, he then pulled out the ring that now fit so well on her finger. He remembered the day, his nerves, her face. However, instead of asking Hughes to pull off on Pacific Coast Highway, he decided on one exit earlier. Why they pulled off into an unknown town when they had been close to an exit he knew well remains unknown. But the two ended up in San Juan Capistrano.

Nixon and Hughes turned right off Ortega Highway and drove into the most historic community in Orange County. Just one month earlier, on October 11, the San Juan Capistrano community had filed a petition and finally became a city. The community legislators wanted their 1,600 residents to have a say in their societal future. Rather than let their votes melt into Dana Point and Capistrano Beach’s majority, the farmland and Mission community wanted its own name and its own purpose.

Within a few minutes, Nixon noticed a large overhead sign at the very end of the town’s main street, Camino Capistrano. Hughes turned right and parked in the lot in the back of the brick and adobe-lined restaurant. They got out of the car and walked under the archway of century old sycamore trees, over the curvy, cobblestone walkway and up the blush-red brick steps that welcomed them to lunch.

Had it been several years earlier, 163 to be exact, Nixon and Hughes would have walked up the steps of a private residence. The adobe walls were constructed in 1797 as part of San Juan resident, Miguel Yorba’s, personal home — one of only three buildings in the area that made up the Catholic parish. During the time the Nation’s fathers gathered to sign the Declaration of Independence, San Juan consisted of about 1,000 Native Americans who spent much of their time farming and herding in the San Juan hills. Spanish missionaries soon swarmed into the natives’ village, forever changing its historical significance. Despite the forceful overturn of governance, the natives peacefully agreed to tend the thousands of cattle and fields of crops. Soon the town flourished with wheat, barley, corn and beans. The population also increased dramatically as the missionaries and natives intermarried. Father Junipero Serra and his church separated the large community of peaceful hunter-gatherers and began building several adobe houses and baptizing the Native Americans. Miguel Yorba, his wife and their five children continued to live in their home, now surrounded with 33 other Spanish-style buildings.

El Adobe’s owner, Ed Cornwall looked up and saw the Vice President and his escort approaching through his front doors. Blinking, he retucked his shirt, quickly combed his hair with his fingers and skipped up to shake Nixon’s hand. Cornwall walked them into the lobby. Nixon looked up and took in the cozy little room.

*Welcome to El Adobe de Capistrano, Mr. Vice President.*

He first noticed the lobby’s walls. Earth tones of terracotta and red clay integrated pieces of old, broken stone on their ascent towards the wood-beamed ceilings. Nixon could tell this place had been here a while. While the old building gave off an aged, almost veteran feeling, the bricks seemed to hoist their shoulders high — proudly holding on to the past, inviting the Vice President to become a part of the restaurant’s rich history.

In the days of the Native American and Catholic influences, the old stone pieces used to fit into a much more prestigious building. Before the Earthquake of 1812, the San Juan Mission rose above any other building in Orange County at an impressive 125 feet. Even though it was the seventh mission constructed, the missionaries nicknamed it *The Jewel of the Missions.* Shaped in the form of a Roman cross, the mortar and irregular-sized stone pieces rose together into a striking 10-story Catholic mission. The seven-dome masterpiece that stood alone amidst the Southern California skyline collapsed in the earthquake. With no other place to go for medical care, San Juan residents took over Miguel Yorba’s home and tended to the injured in this makeshift hospital. They also lugged some of the broken Mission stone into the building as a memorial to the greatness of what their town once used to offer.

The number of red-tiled roofs began to dwindle after the great quake. No longer considered a religious parish, the Mission was sold and the surrounding lands distributed among several wealthy families. With a simultaneous outbreak of influenza, the population decreased from 1,361 in 1800 to 113 in 1846. The poor pueblo sank back into the Californian cracked, dry dirt, accepting defeat.

As Nixon followed Cornwall through the lobby, several families turned their heads in a confused daze. He smiled and continued by, shifting his attention to the room’s architecture. The East and West wing of the restaurant came together in a disjointed version of a lobby. He walked along the ceramic tiled floor and down the rod iron-railed stairs that descended into the main dining room. Aged brick and rich, dark wood gave the building the feel of strong, paternal security. Several round tables topped with fresh carnations and silverware filled the room. The lunchtime talk amongst these tables quieted into hushed whispers as Hughes pointed toward the table he thought best suited the Vice President’s safety. They sat at the table in the back corner, away from windows, with their backs to the walls. To his left, Nixon could see a bar with different bottles of alcohol lining the back wall behind it. The room seemed to hold its breath, anticipating a crowd; a line of stools placed a foot away from each other awaited their next patrons. To his right, Nixon could see a room prepared for a large group with a hand painted “Portola Room” curving over the doorway. He saw a long table, placed and ready for a crowd. The empty chairs stood at attention.

Where there now was silence in the Portola room, jail inmates once whispered and scratched notes onto the walls. Had Nixon walked fully into the room and descended the enclosed staircase within, he would have noticed the bars of the Juzgado jail wrapping around an inlet of a room and read the prisoners’ notes still legible on the stone walls. Now filled with bottles of aged wine and a single table for small parties, this room used to quarantine the criminals of Capistrano. In 1848, California passed hands in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and seceded into the United States, later becoming its own state in 1850. Cowboys, bandits and ranchers swarmed into the town as soon as California struck gold. On Saturday nights, loud laughter, drunken brawls and the occasional gunshot drifted though the dry, Santa Ana wind. Due to the vast amount of robberies, San Juan residents agreed to construct the Juzgado justice court and jail right next door to Miguel Yorba’s former home and the town’s current hospital. As rumor has it, a California outlaw, Joaquin Murietta, had been jailed and hung within El Adobe’s walls. The story goes that the peace loving man and his brother were falsely accused of stealing a mule from a neighboring home. The residents hung his brother, Jesus, and whipped Joaquin. To make matters worse, his wife, Rosita, was gang raped and died in his arms. Joaquin swore revenge and hunted to kill all those who had violated the love of his life. He took to the San Juan hills and lived out his days as a bandit during the Gold Rush. As the inspiration for the fictional character, Zorro, he valiantly robbed from the rich and provided for the poor. He was finally caught placing a stolen rose over his wife’s grave, jailed within the Juzgado and eventually tried and hung for his crimes. At least that’s how San Juan chooses to remember it.

While the rumors may not play out exactly to tune, San Juan did change political hands during the Gold Rush years. The onslaught of Americans who moved West transformed the quiet town from its old identity as a religious parish into a community pueblo. The Mission lay in ruins. But, a major aid for the prospective gold miners chugged its way through San Juan in 1894. After years of working on the logistics, Southern California Railway General Manager, K.H. Wade and his associates had finished the San Juan Capistrano Train Depot. Visitors rode down from LA or up from San Diego and swarmed the little town with fresh faces and foreign tongues. While the quiet town would never be as quiet again, residents welcomed the train depot with open arms and raised glasses to a new era full of prospective travel and economic progression.

The train doors opened to floods of even more miners in 1895 as rumors spread that a group of Spaniards had discovered more gold than ever before in the San Juan hills. The newly arrived Anglos built trade posts throughout town in order to encourage those who had found any gold to trade for merchandise. They set up the most popular trade post in the street between the jail and the hospital, cutting through the current lobby of El Adobe. Anglos and Spaniards alike traded gold for goods, stopping their stagecoaches next to their neighbors’ and picking up their mail at the tiny post office also snuggled in between.

El Adobe’s dimly flickering lights lit up a room that still embraced its Gold Rush heritage. Photographs of the past owners and miners, Richard and Nancy O’Neill, hung scattered across the walls, mixed in with paintings of the revered Mission before the earthquake. While seated within, Nixon and Hughes felt secluded from the modern neighborhood noises. But the sounds of 1960 waited at the door each time another couple would walk in for lunch. The town buzzed with familial commotion. The Swallow’s Inn, several buildings down opened as a country western bar some years ago and never failed to attract the loudest, rowdiest of San Juan’s residents or vagrants. Families, packed in Chevy station wagons, parked in front of the Capistrano Hotel for dinner and a walk around the town square. The hills on the outskirts of town budded with new life each spring, drawing many out to harvest the crops and haul them into town during the summer.

These crops finally began to flourish on the San Juan hills once more in the early 1900s, after the newly arrived began to settle down and try their hands at farming. It took several years, but by 1924, the dry soil budded and eventually sprouted cacti, thin chaparral and — after a few nights of rain — fields of yellow mustard. One resident in particular, Miss Blanche Dolph, set her mind to massaging the clumpy, hard soil into life and persuading a multitude of grape and blackberry vines to spring up outside her home. The town then got down on its knees and planted the buds that now bloom throughout the town. In the springtime, peaches, plums, apples and guavas bloomed on the hilltops overlooking the Southern Orange County coast. In the winter, fig, orange, lemon and pear trees supplied enough fruit for several Christmases over.

With new life and refreshed spirit in this long-standing town, a Catholic Father, St. John O’Sullivan arrived in San Juan soon after and found the Mission he had heard so much about lying in shambles. But, he put his head down and got to work, attempting to preserve its elegance and religious significance by bolstering the pillars and remolding the adobe walls himself. His work was not in vain. He finally procured the attention from the Landmark Society nearby which gifted $250,000 towards excavation, preservation and supplementation. O’Sullivan had successfully shifted the town’s attention back to its roots. The historic jewel of a Mission would once again hoist its shoulders high above any of the town’s several story structures.

At the time, women’s Mary Jane pumps daily clicked past the slowly restoring ruin of the Mission. They could hear the priests and altar boys chanting High Mass, as they made their way into the San Juan town square to do their shopping. San Juan residents also developed interest in and eventually fell in love with the craze that had spread throughout the nation: Automobiles. Men rumbled over the newly constructed Ortega Highway that connected San Juan to outer cities, making jobs available in these neighboring towns.

The newly beloved automobiles coaxed the town into eliminating the stagecoach passageway that separated the two aged, adobe buildings. The two became one as new ownership took over and turned the buildings into a joint residence and convenience store.

Townsfolk with enough money utilized the town’s hilly landscape and discovered the hobby of motorcycling. Some even got so good as to compete in stunts and races. Over 25,000 people would board the train, embark by stagecoach or drive their automobiles over to the 500 feet of steep, bumpy San Juan hills in order to watch their friends and family members compete in gravity defying stunts. Whether out for fun or out at work, families would gather back at home for dinner each night. Most would finish dishes and huddle together over their radio in the evenings, listening intently to President Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats. With renewed hope from their president, parents would tuck the kids in and crawl in bed themselves before starting the day over again in the morning.

Nixon sat down in a Naugahyde seat and picked up a menu. He perused the listings of Continental cuisine. Everything looked good. Torn, but smelling the spice and flavor of Mexican food wafting in from the kitchen, he decided to customize his lunch. He asked for a chile relleno, a chicken enchilada and a shredded beef taco. Rice and beans on the side, of course. He would make this order many times over the years — enough to make it an official menu item, labeled “The President’s Special.” For years, Nixon would drive up from the Western White House in San Clemente for lunch. He also would have his men call El Adobe and ask the restaurant to cater almost every event he hosted. For each occasion, he asked an assistant to call El Adobe and request only Mexican cuisine. Per Nixon’s repetitive request, the chef eventually condensed the wide variety of food on the menu, completely converting El Adobe into a strictly Mexican food restaurant.

The sounds of simmering and smell of warm tortillas filled the room as he waited for his food, helping to distract him from his own thoughts. *What will tomorrow bring? Did I do enough?* It was too late to do anything more. Setting down his menu and loosening his tie, he looked out the windows that lined the walls and led into the courtyard strung with overhead lights. Straining past the restaurant’s wooden gate, he could see that this building stood out amidst the rest of the contemporary, stucco square. With years on any other building besides the prestigious Mission down the street, this adobe-walled restaurant now poised amidst its fellow buildings, gave off a quiet sense of wisdom. He gazed back down into El Adobe’s courtyard and took in the empty marble altar that stood at the far end. He could just make out two stained glass windows beside the little altar — one of Mary and another of Jesus. The sunlight subdued the colors in each pane, but the stained glass promised to add a colorful vibrancy to the veteran building and vintage courtyard in an evening wedding.

While not set up for a wedding on this Tuesday, El Adobe’s wooden gate opened to greet hundreds of people to weddings each year. By the spring of 1948, the San Juan Capistrano population had again dramatically increased and the local economy was flourishing. Horse racing had brought an entirely new crowd of people, eager to bet on and root for their favorite horses in the San Juan Capistrano Handicap. Equestrian entries would gather in the center of town, along with a two-mile parade of marching bands and floats, in order to celebrate the annual return of San Juan’s famous swallows. Each year, right around March 19, the birds would migrate back into town for the spring and summer, giving residents a reason to gather together and commemorate their love for their town bird and western heritage.

The tradition started in the days of Father O’Sullivan who first observed their migration patterns. He convinced several of the San Juan residents to track their arrivals with him. It started slow, but eventually people across town would crane their necks over the buildings’ rooftops and the Mission’s bell tower to try and spot the birds’ return.

O’Sullivan would toll the Mission bell. One shout would lead to another and eventually throngs of people would run to the streets in order to watch the swallows swoop into town by the hundreds. 70 years later, the tradition continued. As daylight on the momentous day waned, music, singing and laughter would only grow louder. Participants learned to square dance on the main street’s moonlight, one hand in their partner’s and the other on their drink. Everyone cheered and clinked glasses as The San Juan Chamber announced the annual Swallow’s Day queen, Miss San Juan Capistrano.

With an increase in Swallow’s Day attendees, weekend visitors and hungry jockeys, El Adobe opened as a restaurant in 1948. On its first day open, the restaurant hosted the wedding and reception of the First Commander of Camp Pendleton, General Fagan. Not much is remembered about General Fagan, but the people did remember the food as they continued to return for weeknight dinners or weekend weddings. Whether attending a wedding or dining on a Friday night, the recalcitrant young men would leave El Adobe at closing time and shuffle in swarms past the local liquor store and grocery to Swallow’s Inn for more to drink, as they continued to place brash bets over which horse would win the San Juan Capistrano Handicap purse.

On this afternoon in 1960, the chefs were less overwhelmed by an onslaught of hungry drunkards and more surprised to have a Presidential candidate eating at their small, family-owned, restaurant. They gladly accepted his off-the-menu request and served him and Hughes their meals. The full platters put before them disappeared within seconds. Nixon’s anxiety that day had worked up his appetite. He swallowed each salsa-covered morsel with increasing appreciation. Finishing his meal, he placed his napkin over his plate, stood up from his chair and asked to speak with the chef, who quickly emerged from the kitchen and stood before Nixon’s table. Nixon smiled broadly, thanked him in Spanish and shook his hand. He promised Cornwall he would return soon.

Hughes picked Nixon up outside the front door. El Adobe slipped past them as he slid into the car, settling himself back into the drive, into the elections, into the quickly changing future.