

# RADIO SANTA CRUZ: A GLIMPSE OF ISLAND RANCH LIFE FROM 1951 TO 1984

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Abstract—For over 30 years, Pier Gherini, one of the owners of the 6,200 acre Gherini Ranch located on the east end of Santa Cruz Island, kept a log of the thousands of radio transmitted calls from his home in Santa Barbara, California. A glimpse of some of the notations in the radio log, often gleaned from scrambled and crackling transmission sounds, provide a graphic historic picture of the workers and their trials and tribulations in laboring on the island rancho. The logs provide a snapshot of island ranching over a 30-year period beginning in 1951. What becomes clear in reading the radio logs is the variety of skills exhibited by island workers. They operated heavy equipment, graded roads, repaired vehicles, erected windmills, built a sawmill, drove piles and annually repaired a wooden wharf, welded together a metal pier, constructed a dam, installed thousands of fence posts and strung miles of fencing, assembled a house, laid plumbing lines, and replaced roofs. They rode horses, herded and processed sheep and stuffed thousands of bulky wool sacks with the fine wool of the Rambouillet-Merino island breed. This paper presents excerpts from the logs that provide a unique window into the lives of these workers from 1951–1984 and represent an important and detailed source of information regarding the cultural history of Santa Cruz Island.<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords: Channel islands, cultural history, ranching, Santa Cruz Island*

## INTRODUCTION: THE CREATION OF AN ISLAND RANCHO

Santa Cruz Island, a Mexican land granted property located twenty miles off the coast of California, stretches 23.5 miles and spans 62,000 acres. Frenchman Justinian Caire immigrated to San Francisco, California in 1852 and along with nine other investors purchased the island in 1869 and formed the Santa Cruz Island Company. Sometime in the 1880s, Caire became the sole owner of the Santa Cruz Island Company. Historically, since the early 1850s, previous island owners used it primarily for sheep grazing. Caire continued the tradition of raising sheep (primarily a Rambouillet-Merino breed), improved and expanded the operation and developed a vineyard and wine making business. In doing so, Caire had to solve the difficult problem of how to manage such a

cumbersome piece of isolated real estate. For years, workers' contact with the mainland depended on infrequent boat transportation. Caire tackled this problem in 1893 by having a 64-foot boat built that he appropriately named *Santa Cruz*. Trips to and from the island became a twice a week routine often interrupted by weather and mechanical problems.

Caire died in 1897 and was survived by his wife, Albina and their six children, Delphine, Arthur, Amelie, Aglae, Frederic and Helene. Caire's death sparked twenty years of litigation among his family over the control of the Santa Cruz Island Company (Gherini 1994). The various legal actions led to the dissolution of the corporation and the partition of the island into seven parcels in 1925 (Gherini 1997). Several of Caire's children sold their portions, along with the schooner *Santa Cruz*, to Edwin Stanton in 1937, and Stanton thus acquired 90% of the island. However, Caire's two

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1. In 1980 Congress enacted and President Jimmy Carter signed legislation creating the Channel Islands National Park, the Country's 40<sup>th</sup> National Park. The Park included the islands of Santa Barbara, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel. Section 201 of Public Law 96-199, creating the Channel Islands National Park, emphasized that an important purpose of the enabling legislation was "to protect the nationally significant natural, scenic, wildlife, marine, ecological, archaeological, cultural, and scientific values of the Channel Islands in the State of California...".

married daughters, Amelie and Aglae, received their two parcels on the east end of the island. In 1932, Amelie's daughter, Maria, and her husband, San Francisco attorney Ambrose Gherini, bought out her siblings' and her aunt Aglae's interests. The island's east-end thus became known as the Gherini Ranch (Gherini 1997).

Upon acquiring the Gherini Ranch, Ambrose Gherini made it clear to his sons Pier and Francis that the management of the ranch would eventually be their responsibility. For young boys in grade school at the time, this seemed exciting and adventurous. Events, however, intervened. Both Pier and Francis went to law school, became lawyers and served in the Armed Services during World War II. After the war, Ambrose Gherini, in ailing health, managed the ranch business with the help of his son, Pier, who was practicing law in Santa Barbara. Upon Ambrose's death on 7 April 1952, Pier took over management of the ranch from his home in Santa Barbara, and established a radio communication system to monitor the daily activities on the ranch (P. Gherini 1989). The logs he kept of those communications contain details of daily ranch life from that time until 1984, and provide new insight into the lives and challenges of the workers on the island during that period.

### WHY RADIO COMMUNICATION?

The Gherini family operated a sheep ranch on the eastern 6,200 acres of the island from 1926 until 1984 that was one-tenth the size of the sheep operation run by the Caires.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, for these 58 years, the Gherini family endured the arduous tasks of herding, shearing, docking, separating and transporting sheep and wool to the markets on the mainland. The Gherinis used hundreds of miles of smooth metal gauge fencing to divide the east end of the island into sixteen different pastures, some with lanes and wings. The

fence system provided control of the animals and conservation of range lands by rotating the flocks from the different fields. These pastures were mentioned often in the logs, and included Scorpion, Smugglers', Aguaje #1 & #2, Middle Field, Potato Field #1 & #2; Wether Pasture, Mountain Pasture, New Field, Middle Field, Campo Grande, Buck Pasture, Useless Field, and Death Valley.

Transportation loomed as the major obstacle in sustaining an isolated island sheep ranch. The Gherinis tackled the problem both from the air and from the sea. On 28 April 1928, Earle Ovington, America's first air mail pilot, flew to the Gherini Ranch and in the process delivered the first and only official air mail letter to the island (Ovington letter). While at the ranch, Ovington selected two suitable air strips for the Gherinis who used them during their tenure of ownership (Gherini 1989). Over the years, small planes would land either at the Campo Grande field near Potato Harbor or at the Smugglers' field near Smugglers' Cove. To travel to the island by sea, the Gherinis initially relied on a variety of vessels, including the Larco fish boats from Santa Barbara, to carry personnel, supplies and animals to and from the island (Gherini 1997). Again, like Caire's experience, the boat transportation, and hence communication with the ranch proved to be haphazard. In 1932, the Gherinis purchased a 42-foot Alaskan salmon troller, which they named *Natco*<sup>2</sup> (Gherini 1997). The Gherinis' purchase of the boat and the establishment of two air strips helped, but did not solve, the problem of daily communication with the ranch.

In 1935 the Gherinis obtained a license from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) permitting them to operate a low-power 5 "watter" radio transmitter at the ranch at Scorpion Cove that was the headquarters for the Gherini Ranch. By maintaining a communication schedule with the Coast Guard's Light Station on the east end of

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1. The Gherinis consulted with Clifford McElrath, a former superintendent for the Caires from 1919–1921 concerning the advisability of operating a sheep ranch (Gherini 1997). McElrath recommended a sheep operation. He wrote a book entitled *On Santa Cruz Island* about his island experiences (McElrath 1967).

2. The name *Natco* was an abbreviation for National Trading Company which Ambrose Gherini had incorporated in 10 October 1916 for the purpose of conducting an import-export business unrelated to the island. He decided to use the company name to operate the sheep ranch on the east end of the island in 1926 when the Gherini family started ranching there. The *Natco* was moored in Santa Barbara Harbor (Gherini 1997).

Anacapa Island, messages could be relayed to the mainland in cases of emergency (Gherini 1997). In 1951 the Gherinis improved communication by obtaining permission from the FCC to install a radio transmitter (2,726 kilocycles; maximum of 60 watts of power) at the Scorpion Ranch on the east-end. Pier Gherini installed a similar transmitter at his home in Santa Barbara, California. The FCC assigned radio call signs for each site; "KMD83" referred to the Santa Barbara residence and "KMC83" identified the Ranch station. Pier Gherini then established a morning (0730 hrs.) and an evening (1800 hrs.) call schedule, seven days a week. The new communication system allowed daily conversation with the ranch hands. Everyone in his family became familiar with the call: "KMD83 calling KMC83, do you read me" (Gherini 1997, p. 201).

#### THE RADIO LOGS 1951-1984

After every call Pier Gherini wrote in a spiral notebook a short cryptic note of the substance of the call and jotted down the date and the time of each call. After 34 years of recording, Gherini filled 13 notebooks containing over 15,000 entries. In writing about the island ranch in the 1966 issue of the Santa Barbara Historical Society's *Noticias*, Pier Gherini observed that "the story of the island ranch is largely the story of people. All of these people had one common characteristic. They knew and loved the island. Each in his own way was rugged and self-reliant. They took its beauties and hardships in stride." (Gherini 1997, p. 198). The radio logs chronicle for the first time the daily life of the ranch hands and highlights the multitude of chores performed by the island workers. In a sense, the radio logs contain the workers' story, at times in their own words, of how they lived and worked. The logs reveal their accomplishments, frustrations and hardships.

#### *The Workers*

During the 34 years in which Gherini kept the radio logs, approximately 50 individuals worked on the Gherini Ranch. Ethnic backgrounds varied and usually three or four employees lived at the ranch at any one time except during shearing season. Many workers were World War II veterans

who brought to the island not only their skills but also their deep emotional scars. Longevity of employee's service fluctuated. Some workers stayed on the payroll for nine or 10 years while others, particularly in the 1970s, were short-timers. In the 1950s the workers received salaries which ranged from \$90 to \$150 per month, a stipend that increased to a scale of \$90 to \$225 per month in the 1960s. Gradually, the wages escalated and in the late 1970s, Fidel Herrera received the highest salary of \$300 per month. Each paycheck had the usual deductions for taxes, disability and social security. Other items subtracted from the salary included personal items ordered by the workers (National Trading Company Employee Records). The radio logs contain the familiar refrain, "Joe gave supply list," or "read supply list," when the workers routinely reported twice-a-month the need for supplies including their own personal items such as cigarettes, clothes, toothpaste, lighter fluid, stamps, envelopes, stationary, and hair oil.

The workers normally lived in the Spartan living quarters on the second floor of the historic adobe building that was built in 1887 in Scorpion Valley. The bathroom consisted of an outdoor outhouse, and the workers took hot showers in a wooden shower stall built next to the east side of the adobe. The shower's plumbing connected with a water heater that was heated by the wood-burning stove in the kitchen. The foreman's living accommodations exceeded the workers since he lived in a separate residence built in 1955 and at times the foreman's wife or lady friend accompanied him. The women usually cooked and gardened as paid employees, and all the workers ate heartily and often.

Much has been written about sheep ranching on Santa Cruz Island including on the Gherini Ranch (Gherini 1997) and, not surprisingly, the radio logs often refer to issues surrounding the sheep operation. Work involving the management of approximately 5,000 sheep on the Gherini Ranch kept the workers very busy, and required that they exhibit skills in horseback riding (or soon learned how to ride). They rode on the long and at times dangerous roundups that took riders through narrow volcanic canyons and up and down steep trails. They also spent endless hours building and repairing fence lines, constructing projects and performing the other chores essential to an island

ranch enterprise, and in this area the logs provide particularly interesting insight into the challenges of maintaining equipment on an island.

#### *Equipment and Maintenance*

Operating, maintaining and repairing equipment consumed much time and caused many project delays. Not only did the workers need to have the skills required to operate the varied types of equipment but they also had to be adept at repairing them. To make the necessary repairs, however, they also needed the parts, most of which were ordered in the daily radio calls. For example, the log entries of March 1953 demonstrate the persistent problems of equipment breakdown: “Broke plow casting, will weld tomorrow,” “repair plow casting,” “plow casting broke again—will re-weld, and then a third time, “plow casting broke again.” Other entries tell the same story: Rudy “grading road in Wether field,” “tractor breakdown,” “fixed tractor, will commence mowing tomorrow,” “to Smugglers’—cut hay,” “sickle bar broken,” “mower broke again, can’t repair it.” The mowers, dating from the 1890s, were horse-drawn and used to cut or mow hay primarily to feed the stock of approximately 15–20 horses. Often mowers featured mechanisms which lifted the cutter bar to clear rocks, stumps, or other obstructions when the operator could see them (Gherini, J. and Lohuis, D. Farm Implements). Today, three rusted mowers remain at Scorpion Ranch on display as reminders of island farming activities that traversed both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The log journals also show that by the late 1950s equipment transport to the island continued as the owners replaced and discontinued the use of old farm equipment such as the gang plow, disc harrow, and the seeder. Instead of seeding the fields, the Gherinis relied on the annual grasses and if the feed was insufficient they shipped feed to the island by boat or shipped more animals off the island. The radio logs indicate that this happened in 1960 and 1961. Pier Gherini routinely charted the amount of rain the ranch received, and from 1 December 1960 through August of 1961, only two and three tenths inches of rain fell on the ranch. The lack of rain impacted the growth of pasture grasses and feed for the animals. By August 1961, the *Hodge*, a sixty-one foot boat purchased by the

Gherinis in 1959, began hauling loads of baled hay to the island. Notations of “hay hauling” by the *Hodge* continue into December of 1961 when winter storms finally brought over two inches of rain.

The Gherinis eventually used two Oliver tractors manufactured between 1937 and 1948, to replace horse drawn equipment. One was brought to the island in 1954 and the other shipped to the island in the 1960s. The radio notebooks contain an interesting notation: “valley pump-broken rod, using Oliver,” showing that at times the Oliver was also used to help pump water. When the gasoline powered Briggs and Stratton engines, which were used to run the pumps, failed, the ranchers used the fly wheel attached to the Oliver to power the pumps. A large belt was attached to the fly wheels of both the water pump and the tractor. On other occasions, workers used the versatile tractor to tow other equipment: “used Oliver to tow cat back to Smugglers’ for repairs.” The “cat” refers to the Caterpillar 30 which the Gherinis brought to the island in 1938 via barge and tug boat (Gherini and Lohuis). The owners eventually mothballed the Caterpillar 30 and replaced it with a D-7 Caterpillar which they purchased in 1965. The Caterpillar 30 remains on display at the Scorpion Ranch today.

According to the journals, in April 1956 the workers prepared to receive a new hay baler. This was a post World War II pick-up baler that was pulled by a tractor and had an automatic twine tie. The model baler had a capacity of up to six bales per minute and could bale up to ten tons of hay per hour (Gherini and Lohuis). The workers, however, had to use their ingenuity to get the baler off the boat. The radio diary entry of April 4<sup>th</sup> states “will make boom to lift baler off *Natco*.” On April 7<sup>th</sup> the workers offloaded the baler and supplies from the *Natco* and by April 9<sup>th</sup> the log informed that “baler working ok. Joe tested it.” The notebook entries then show that the workers “cutting hay all day Smugglers flat,” and by the end of April “hailed 500 bales Sat[urday] from Smugglers field.” The work crew then switched fields and “brought over baler and mower today, will cut Campo Grande tomorrow.” The radio journals disclose that on May 15<sup>th</sup> there was “trouble with the baler” which was repaired on 16 May 1956 and the next day the logs noted that the crew “bailed

100 bales.” The last entry shows that the “baler broke down-brot [sic] it in.” Despite the introduction of newer equipment the problem of breakage continued.

The notations also highlight the dangers of bringing equipment and supplies to the island. The log entry of 28 September 1974 reveals that a jeep was dropped into the water when being unloaded from the *Hodge*. In his morning transmission to the foreman on 10 January 1976, Pier Gherini advised that the *Hodge* would be “over fuel this day.” The owners routinely shipped gasoline and diesel in 55-gallon barrels to the island by boat. The *Hodge* sank that day and the following day Gherini advised his foreman that the 37-ton “*Hodge* sank about 1100 yesterday, all aboard off safely. Fuel will be shipped later.” After the sinking of the *Hodge*, the Gherinis relied on air transportation to get supplies and personnel to the island, using marine transportation to ship fuel, large equipment and animals. The *Vaquero II* which was owned and operated by the Vail and Vickers families, and used by the Gherinis to transport sheep off the island during the 1960s and the 1970s, also made supply stops at Scorpion Ranch. Built in Santa Barbara by Lindwall Boat Works in 1958 for transporting cattle to and from Santa Rosa Island, the *Vaquero II's* length of 65 feet with a 25-foot beam made it an ideal vessel to haul supplies and ship animals. The boat could carry 400–600 sheep depending on their size (Allen 1996).

At times, workers demonstrated their ingenuity in making their own equipment. The log journal of 15 March 1967 shows that the workers “finished putting A frame on truck.” The “A” frame consisted of metal beams attached to each side of the front of the Ford truck (a military vehicle with a flat bed) and joined at the lifting end with a pulley. It was supported by cable guy wires from the top of the “A” frame and attached to the rear of the truck. The mechanical spool winch on the front of the truck had a cable that was threaded through the pulley on top of the “A” frame. A counter weight was put in the flat bed portion of the truck. The “A” frame device proved useful for many years in lifting heavy loads. By 9 June 1978, the truck was still in use as “Fidel installed motor on A frame truck.” The new Ford engine, according to the logs, came to the island by plane on June 6<sup>th</sup>. Fidel ordered a new radiator hose for the truck on 7 August 1978.

### *Projects — Dam Construction and Road Maintenance*

During the period in which Pier Gherini penned his journal entries, the radio diary contains a good deal of information concerning the construction of various island projects. In addition to the sheep operation and other ranch activities, the workers spent much time, energy and ingenuity in working on these projects. One of the most important jobs was the building of a dam in the early 1950s to provide an additional water source for the sheep. The 1948 drought that hit the island made the building of a dam a priority. It was not a new idea. Ed Stanton who owned 90% of the island had planned a large lake or reservoir in the central mountains of the island. He never carried out his plan, but in 1951 the Gherinis commenced the building of a dam in a volcanic ravine near San Pedro point on the mesa of the east-end of the island (Gherini 1997).

The records of radio calls provide a good chronology of the building of the dam. On 7 February 1951, Pier Gherini talked to his ranch foreman, Joe Griggs (1923–1974), “about dam construction.” Griggs, perhaps the most interesting and skilled island worker, came to the island in 1944 and by the time he left in 1956 had worked his way up to ranch foreman. He had no formal education but schooled himself by reading *Popular Mechanics* (Gherini 1997). On February 9<sup>th</sup>, the log notes that Griggs “will get dirt samples from the dam.”, and on February 20<sup>th</sup> records “dynamite for dam over today [by] boat.” On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Griggs advised Pier Gherini the “blast worked ok.” On February 25<sup>th</sup>, Griggs told Gherini that the “dam filled with water.”, and on March 16<sup>th</sup> reported that the “spillway on dam complete.” On 4 January 1952, ranch hand Tony Hernandez reported “6 ft of water in dam in Smugglers’ Field.” Then on January 16<sup>th</sup>, Hernandez reported “damage to dam at Smugglers.” In November 1952, the log verifies that the “dam work complete as to fill—must build a spillway.” After heavy rains on 1 December 1952, the foreman reported the “dam in good shape—less than half filled. No damage by rain.” Two years later another winter storm hit the island and brought heavy rains. “4[inch] rain-heavy damage fences at Scorpion-Rudy will check dam tomorrow,” reported the foreman. Two days later, on 15 February 1954,

Rudy relayed the information that the “dam washed out—heavy damage at Scorpion.” The rains apparently proved to be too much for the dam to handle, and after the winter of 1953–1954 the dam was never rebuilt.

The heavy rains not only destroyed the dam but also continually made the network of dirt roads impassible. In January of 1954, the logs show that “Rudy to Aguaje [to do] road work” which lasted several days. The road was particularly important since it provided access to the southern portion of the ranch. Since the soil was soft, the road was very susceptible to washouts during heavy rains. After more rain, the log entries for April 1954 point out that Rudy “re-graded road Aguaje to Smugglers.” Other log entries disclose that Rudy working “hauling the plow to Smugglers’,” “plowing at Smugglers’,” “Rudy work at Scorpion, repair tractor,” “Rudy complete overhaul of Cat[erpillar]”, and “Rudy blasting rock for wharf”, which was essential to provide rip rap to protect the wharf.

#### *Projects — Sawmill and House Construction*

In early 1955, Joe Griggs began planning the building of a residence (which would be used for the foremen) and a sawmill. In February 1955, Pier Gherini advised Joe Griggs that the “Natco might come over from Hueneme with house material.” Griggs decided to build a house in Scorpion Valley near the historic bunk house which was built sometime between 1914 and 1918 as the owners’ residence, and the initial materials arrived on February 4<sup>th</sup>. Joe Griggs, however, did not begin construction of the house until August of 1955. Griggs also wanted to build a sawmill and envisioned producing lumber from the eucalyptus trees that Justinian Caire introduced to the island in the 1880s. Griggs used the engine from the 1918 Waterloo Boy Tractor to power the sawmill because the tractor, lightered ashore in 1918, had fallen into disuse shortly after its arrival because it was too heavy and difficult to operate (Gherini and Lohuis).

In June 1955 Pier Gherini advised Joe that he had “picked up rails for the sawmill today,” and that they “discussed machinery of saw shaft.” The railroad rails provided a track for the carriage which carried the eucalyptus tree trunk into the saw blade. The log indicates that on June 5<sup>th</sup>, Joe “started work on the sawmill.” The construction of

the mill continued for over a month, with notations showing “working on sawmill,” “working on carriage frame for sawmill,” and “engine installed on sawmill.” The next entry, of 8 August 1955, relates that “sawmill working ok.” But, like the Waterloo Boy Tractor, the sawmill also fell into disuse. Because eucalyptus wood warped badly and hardened when it dried, it was impractical to use as lumber. The radio logs show that on 20 February 1961 the workers were “dismantling sawmill” with the job completed on 6 June 1961.

After building the saw mill, Joe Griggs started the building of his house on 21 August 1955. The logs shows he “built foundations for house,” and on August 30<sup>th</sup> the entry notes “will haul sand and gravel,” and “worked on new house.” On September 19<sup>th</sup> Joe advised that he “will roof new house.” The house built by Griggs was used for foremen and their families and remained as a residence at the ranch for over thirty years. The residence did not survive the 5 December 1997 El Niño flood in Scorpion Valley and was removed by the National Park Service shortly thereafter.

#### *Projects — Scorpion Wharf*

The next significant project was the construction of the wooden wharf in 1956. Because the work on the wharf did not begin until 1956, the workers were able to use the new sawmill to produce lumber for the wharf. This was not the first wood wharf; an original structure was built in combination with a cement block in 1938. Routinely, violent northeast winds during the winter months either damaged or destroyed the wharfs, and the radio logs are laced with references to these occurrences: “wharf damaged,” “working on wharf,” “work on dock,” “heavy NE hitting dock,” “heavy damage to dock,” “heavy NE again pounding wharf,” “Rudy will work on wharf today.” Nevertheless, the maintenance of the wharf remained vital for shipment of supplies, wool sacks and livestock.

The 1956 wharf project entailed putting in eucalyptus pilings which were ideal because of their cylindrical shape. To do this, the radio journals pointed out that the workers built a pile driver and the entry of July 16 states that the “pile driver about complete.” Three days later, the homemade device “drove 2 pilings.” The July 26<sup>th</sup> the radio log shows workers’ “cutting planks for

wharf” at the sawmill and on July 28<sup>th</sup> “all the logs cut for the wharf.” Work at the wharf and at the sawmill continued through August. For example the log entries of August reveal that “4 piles driven yesterday” and “drove 4 pilings” on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. By August 29<sup>th</sup>, the workers “finished flooring” on the wharf and on September 5<sup>th</sup> were “erecting the animal chute” to prepare for the shipping of the sheep.

Like all previous wharfs, however, this one was likewise susceptible to damage from wind and surf, and on 19 December 1956 the log notes, “heavy Santana winds damaged wharf.” The constant battering of the wharf by the winter storms left the structure weakened and it collapsed in January 1959, with the radio journal notations relating the story. At the time 46 large burlap wool sacks and 6 smaller sacks awaited shipment to the mainland. The wool sacks weighed between 300–400 pounds and were six feet in length. Gherini told Benny on January 23<sup>rd</sup> to haul the wool to the wharf so that the sacks could be loaded onto the boat Sunday. Two days later the foreman advised Gherini that the “dock broke—30 sacks slipped into the water.” The workers were only able to salvage two sacks, and on January 25<sup>th</sup>, Benny received word that “divers over 0800 tomorrow to look for sacks.” The workers then built racks “to dry wool.” On January 26<sup>th</sup>, the foreman reported that five sacks of wool were recovered” and the *Hodge* arrived at Scorpion. The *Hodge* could haul approximately 300–400 sheep, depending on their size and could carry 50–60 sacks of wool (Gherini 1997). The entry of January 27<sup>th</sup> explains that the workers and divers “recovered 5 more sacks-total 10-others can’t be found, divers left for SB about noon.” The workers then opened up the recovered sacks, dried the wool for about a week and then re-sacked it. The shipment of wool awaited another day which occurred on February 24<sup>th</sup> when the workers loaded the sacks onto the *Hodge* which brought them to Santa Barbara.

The collapse of the wooden wharf pointed to the necessity of building a wharf of a different and hopefully a more durable design, and in 1966 the owners planned the construction of a metal pier. Toward that end, the notation in the radio log of 25 February 1966 shows that “Hershel needs welder.” Again weather intervened on ranch operations, in this case preventing the delivery of a welder which

then did not arrive until March 10<sup>th</sup>. By March 14<sup>th</sup>, “3 frames completed-halfway to block,” according to Pier Gherini’s notation. The metal frames were made of railroad tracks and the “block” referred to the massive cement block which Pier Gherini helped build in 1938. The block consisted of a concrete base constructed over a large rock. The concrete base was the center piece of the old eucalyptus wood wharf that extended from the shore to the concrete block and beyond. The March 19<sup>th</sup> log entry shows that the workers “finished pier to block-will need more rails and bracing iron.” Work on the metal pier then continued through April and May 1966. By May 6<sup>th</sup> the workers were “laying steel mat on dock.”, and on May 14<sup>th</sup> the workers wanted “50’ telephone poles for fender pilings.” The log entry of May 23<sup>rd</sup> reveals the “dock completed.” This pier lasted for 17 years, but a notation in the journal on 28 January 1983 discloses that the “rest of the dock washed out.” The constant pounding of the pier by the northeast winds had again taken its toll. The owners never built another pier. Only after the National Park Service acquired full ownership of the Gherini Ranch was a new pier constructed in 1999.

#### *Transition to Air Transportation*

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the radio annals reflect a pattern of more use of air transportation. One of the primary reasons for the greater reliance on air transportation was that Francis Gherini took up flying. Francis lived in Oxnard, California and often flew his plane from Oxnard Airport to the ranch, a mere 15-minute flight. This enabled owners of the Gherini Ranch to quickly get needed supplies to the island and allowed the workers to get more time off the island. The journals reflect over 140 plane trips made to the island from 1971–1980. At times the log notes that the air field was “too wet to land.” Heavy use of the airstrip on the plateau near Smugglers’ required constant maintenance as seen in the log entry of 28 June 1972 that shows that the workers leveled the runway by running “heavy angle iron” over it to scrape off the bumps.

#### *Worker Injuries and the Stress of Island Life*

Pier Gherini’s notations of his calls to the ranch also provide insight into the emotional

challenges experienced by the workers. On the first day of May 1954, “Rudy says he wants to quit—worn out,” and on May 7<sup>th</sup> the logs reveal “Rudy home sick.” By May 16<sup>th</sup>, “Rudy wants boat over to come out with Daisy.” On May 18<sup>th</sup>, *Urso*, a boat owned by a fisherman named Pasquali, brought Rudy and his wife, Daisy, into Santa Barbara but they returned to island on May 29<sup>th</sup>, bringing supplies with them. In June 1954, another worker named Ed Plimer “wants to get next boat” so he could get time away from the island rancho. It was common for workers tour of duty to last three or four months. On other occasions, tension developed among the employees. On 28 May 1976 Gherini wrote “men sleeping all day, Ed [Pasich] furious.”

The tough island environment also caused stress. In the early winter when the infamous mainland Santana winds usually hit the island from the north and northeast, conditions were very dry after many months without rain and the water wells could often be low. At these times the frustration of island life again began to show. For example on the 1956 Christmas Eve entry, Gherini wrote: “cook drunk.” The owners of the Gherini Ranch prohibited alcohol on the ranch but some workers occasionally managed to obtain the alcohol from visiting boaters in exchange for fuel or parts. Pier Gherini usually detected the scheme by noticing a change in the ordering patterns when the workers would give a supply list over the transmitter.

Little has previously been written about injuries the island workers sustained in performing the myriad ranch tasks, and the radio logs provide insight into the dangers confronting the workers and show a consistent pattern of injury. There were no emergency centers on the island and every injury involved transportation issues which at times could be complicated by the weather. The logs revealed in September 1954, “Benny hurt hand,” “Benny wants to come in.” The boat came the next day “to pick up Benny.” Pier Gherini then “advised Joe, Benny at hospital-operated on hand.” While working on a fence line, Benny brushed his right hand against some cactus which became imbedded and seriously infected. Benny was hospitalized at Saint Francis Hospital in Santa Barbara where surgery was performed (Argonaut Reports). In another incident Rudy advised in a morning call on 27 August 1956, that “he badly burned left hand—

fire in the Aguaje #1, need help and medical aid—advised Rudy plane be over.” Pier Gherini then called at noon and advised that “plane for Rudy ready to take off—fire crews working on fire.” The following day, the log noted: “fire out—fire crews left for mainland by plane.” The hand injury and fire were both caused by a truck fire that started when Rudy was attempting to clean a carburetor. After starting the truck the engine caught fire and when he attempted to smother the fire with a rag full of fumes the rags exploded and seriously burned his hand (Argonaut Reports).

The sheep in the corrals also posed dangers to the workers. The radio log discloses that on 30 August 1962 “Bruce hurt leg.”; a ram had struck Bruce in the left knee when the workers were sorting the animals. In June of 1967 a sheep-caused injury ended tragically. Pier Gherini wrote a notation that, “Luciano hit in head. Plane over tonight. Hurt in corral.” When confined, the 150-pound sheep would sometimes attack the heavy wood corrals with their horns, putting in danger any workers nearby. In this case a large ram had hit Luciano directly in the head. Four days later, Gherini relayed the bad news to his foreman: “informed Andy of Luciano’s death.” Luciano Moreno was 41 years old.

Injuries even happened to experienced ranch hands like Andy Lucero (1911–1999). Lucero, who worked on the Gherini Ranch from 1965–1973, suffered several injuries over the years. On 16 March 1968 the log shows “Andy reports injuring himself.” On September 15<sup>th</sup> the logs note that Andy injured his collarbone and needed medical treatment at the mainland. In April of 1969 he sprained his back while repairing a washed out road, and in October 1969 he suffered vesicular dermatitis after being exposed to gas, oil, and animals, as well as cooking and dishwashing residue. His most serious injury occurred on 1 February 1970 when he was thrown by a horse and cut his face and fractured both wrists. Both Francis and Pier Gherini were on the island at the time and Francis immediately flew Andy to Oxnard, California where he was admitted to Saint John’s Hospital and eventually recovered.

#### *Weather and Vegetation Challenges*

The Channel fog often comes with startling suddenness creating havoc for both boat and plane



traffic, and the logs provide many examples of weather-related impacts on transportation. For example, the radio journal showed on 5 January 1963, that the boat "*Hodge* turned back to SB-heavy NE wind." Then on 1 January 1975 the notation showed "too windy for chopper." The entry on 24 May 1975 noted "plane unable to come over, too foggy." Then the workers witnessed the violence of the Thanksgiving northeast windstorm of 27 November 1976. The radio log states that the workers observed "3 boats a total wreck" at Smugglers' Beach and "four boats damaged" at Scorpion Harbor. The winds were clocked at 70 m.p.h. with gusts of 90 m.p.h. An estimated 40 boats called for the assistance of the Coast Guard and the Navy and the Coast Guard rescued approximately 100 people near Anacapa and Santa Cruz islands that day. The vicious Santana winds sank several boats and many were in danger of sinking (Wheeler and Kallman 1984). In addition to destroying the dam in 1954, rainfall also hampered all types of ranch operations over the years, and the logs document variations in annual rainfall from between eight to 25 inches.

As if the workers didn't have enough to do, the radio entries demonstrate that as part of their routine chores they also spent considerable time cutting milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) and burning cactus. The notebooks show many references to "cut thistle in valley." Milk thistle presented a difficult problem since at times the thickets with their sharp leaves would be impenetrable. Thistle is not native to the island and was probably introduced in the early nineteenth century (Junak et al. 1995). On 21 October 1960, Pier Gherini wrote in his register that the *Hodge* would be "over tomorrow with tractor-USDA men." On this trip, several advisors from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) came to the ranch. The purpose of the visit was to determine an effective way to eliminate the cactus. The ranch hands tried, in vain, to control the spread of the cactus by burning the prickly pear cactus patches which covered many of the hillsides. Burning cactus became part of the ranch routine as noted in the logs: "burned cactus-pump water," "burn cactus-spread feed," "worked on tractor-burned cactus," "worked on Aguaje Road and burned cactus." Historically two species of coastal prickly pear cactus infested the hills and pastures

of Santa Cruz Island. The cactus seemed to thrive on denuded soil caused by sheep overgrazing. In the early 1950s and 1960s the owners introduced a cochineal insect called *Dactylopius* as a biological agent to kill the cactus. The insect spread rapidly through the extensive cactus patches and eliminated most of them (Gherini 1997).

## END OF THE RADIO ERA

Bill Peterson took over the management of the Gherini Ranch in 1979 although he had no experience running a sheep ranch. Peterson hired a number of workers that included Michel Ravenscroft (who later married Peterson), his son, David, who worked previously for the Gherinis from 1972–1975, and Fidel Herrera who started working for the Gherini Ranch in 1975 and continued working for Peterson. The operational agreement between Bill Peterson and the Gherini family gave Peterson the right "to manage and operate a presently existing sheep ranch for the production and sale of wool, lambs and other sheep..." and restricted the use of the Gherini portion of the island "to the operation of a sheep ranch." The logs then become laced with notations of "no contact" while Peterson ran the ranch. Simply put, Peterson and his workers did not adhere to the required daily communication schedule. The last radio notebook covered a period of nearly four years during which time William Peterson operated the sheep ranch but was remiss in maintaining radio communication. Despite the operational change, Pier Gherini attempted to maintain regular radio contact with the island ranch.

With the metal pier in disrepair, Bill Peterson utilized lumber barges and other vessels to haul sheep and supplies. The radio journal entries for the 1980s once again show how the island workers solved logistical problems in managing a sheep ranch without a pier. On 24 August 1980 the journal informs the reader that the "lumber barge is ashore and secure." The log entries of October 1980 reveal for the first time the name of a small landing craft called the *Double Eagle* that measured 65-feet and could carry 350 sheep. The vessel, built by Bill Peterson, proved useful for island operations because of its ability to land at

the beach. For instance, the log notation of 7 October 1980 shows that the *Double Eagle* “arrived and unloaded tractor on the beach.” On 1 April 1983 Dave Peterson reported that the *Double Eagle* would land at the beach so that lambs and wool could be shipped.

Bill Peterson’s efforts to run an island sheep ranch abruptly came to end in January 1984, when a plane carrying Peterson and two doctor pilots crashed in the Campo Grande field. The plane, a Cessna 182, attempted to land from west to east with the wind at its tail. The resulting investigation showed that the plane came in too fast, overshot the dirt strip, plowed through a fence and careened down a ravine. The Journal entry for 18 January 1984, the day of the crash, showed “no contact” but Pier Gherini wrote a note: “About p.m. today, Bill Peterson badly injured while riding as passenger in plane trying to land on the Campo Grande Field. Plane owned and operated by Gregory Johnson, M.D. and Darrel Davey, M.D. was also a passenger. Taken by helicopter to Oxnard. Petersen in St. Johns Hospital-internal injuries. Both doctors taken to Thousand Oaks Hospital.” Bill Peterson and the two doctors survived the crash.

The last entry in the radio log on 15 March 1984, concluded with the notation “no contact.” Sheep ranching on the Gherini Ranch ended with the departure of Bill Peterson, and so did over three decades of Pier Gherini’s succinct, colorful and detailed reporting of events on the island recorded in the radio logs. What is left is the story of the island workers and the ingenuity, skill and adaptability they showed working on a sheep ranch at sea. “KMD83 clearing with KMC83, out.”

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