

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Max Kortum, Doris Sloan, Father Louis Rossi

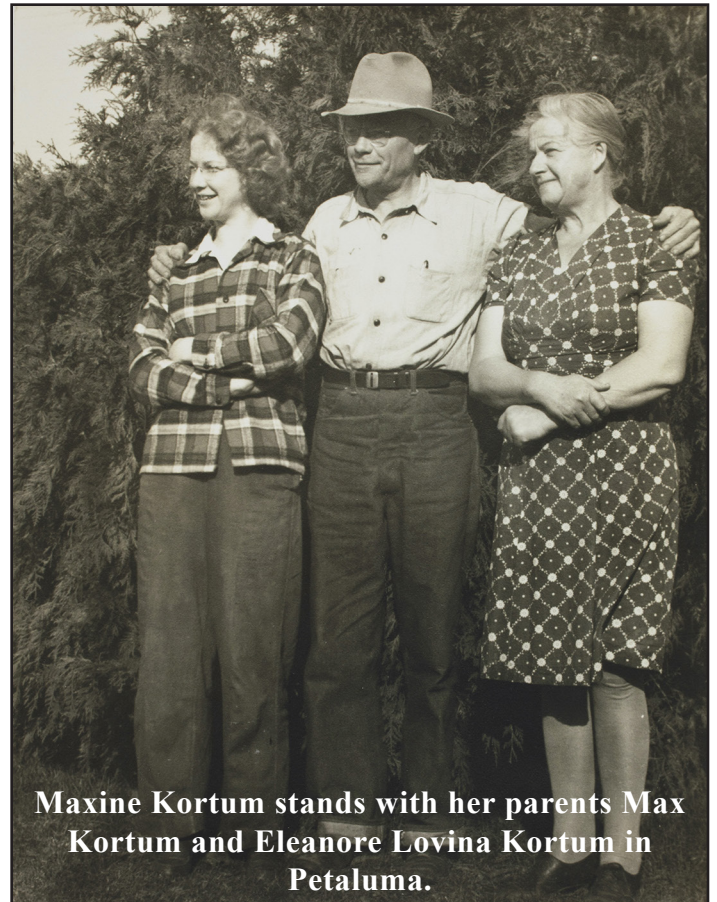
*by Robin Rudderow - 2015*

There is a wonderful story in the current issue of the Petaluma Museum Association Newsletter (Summer/Fall 2015). For a long time Highway 101 ran through downtown Petaluma, but in 1937, after the Golden Gate Bridge was built, the California Highway Commission wanted to build a bypass around the town.

The merchants feared a decline in business, but most of the town folks were in favor of the bypass until they learned that the proposed route went through 120 small chicken farms.

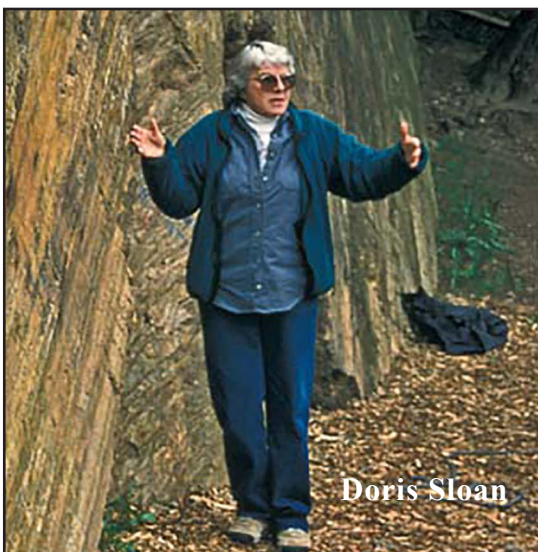
Ignoring the locals, Colonel John Skeggs, the chief highway engineer, gerrymandered his way through the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, and got his proposed route approved.

Enter Max Kortum, a Petaluma chicken farmer. Max led a bitter two year battle against Colonel Skeggs. The Highway Commission finally scheduled a hearing in Sacramento, and 500 Sonoma County residents went up to protest the route.



Maxine Kortum stands with her parents Max Kortum and Eleanore Lovina Kortum in Petaluma.

Governor Earl Warren ordered the route changed to avoid the chicken farms and Colonel Skeggs slunk off into the shadows of bureaucracy. Max is the father of Bill and Karl Kortum, who were instrumental in the fight to stop PG&E from building a nuclear power plant on Bodega Head in the 1960's. The issues were different, but the grass root organizing was similarly employed by each of the Kortum generations to successfully push back threats to their community.



Doris Sloan

Doris Sloan, the now retired UC Berkeley professor, who was also instrumental in the late 1950's/early 1960's in saving Bodega Head from PG&E's proposed nuclear power plant, wrote *Geology of the San Francisco Bay Region* (UC Press 2006). This is a great book! In easy to understand, plain English, Dr. Sloan explains the geologic makeup of the whole Bay Area.

Living by the coast, I am fascinated by how the coast line has

**RBHS Archives**

## MAX KORTUM, DORIS SLOAN & FATHER LOUIS ROSSI

shifted. Six million years ago, the shore of the ocean was further inland, and coastal redwoods grew near Calistoga.

In addition, 80,000 to 120,000 years ago, flat, uplifted marine terraces at the edge of the sea (now outlined by Highway 1) were formed at sea level as wave-cut platforms. The coast has been uplifted to its present height by movement on the San Andreas Fault. (p. 260). Finally, during the last ice age, which was at a maximum 20,000 years ago, “sea level was about 400 feet lower ... than it is today, the shoreline lay far to the west of the present shore, out beyond the Farallon Islands, and the San Francisco Bay was a wide river valley.” (p. 120)

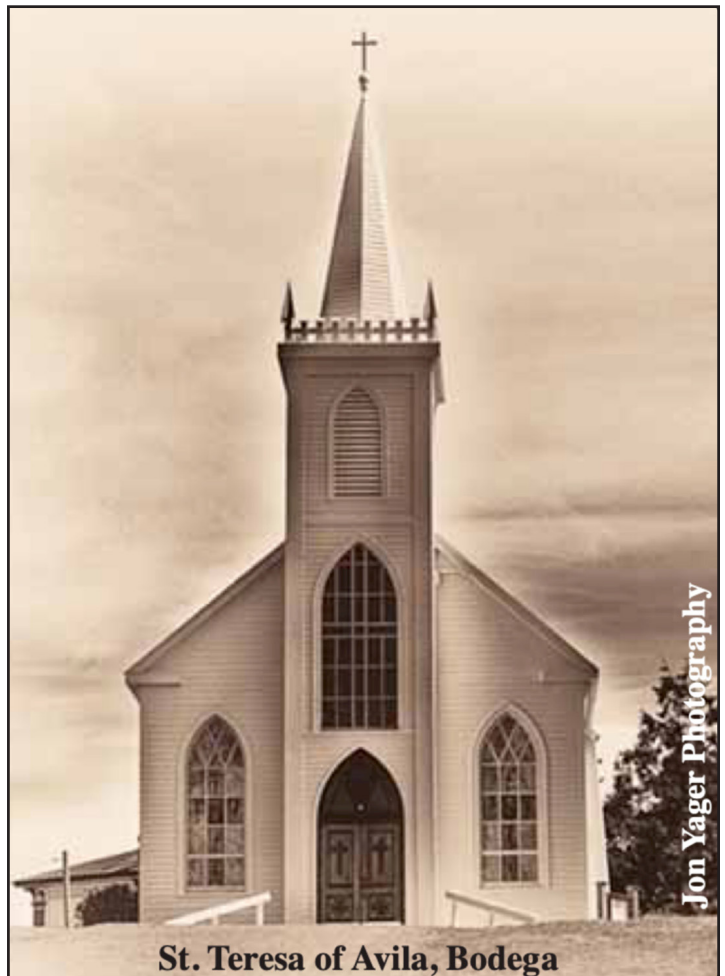
I came away from reading this book with an appreciation that the Earth is in constant motion, that it is this motion that creates the beautiful landscape of the Sonoma County, and that we who chose to live at the edge of two tectonic plates need to be prepared for seismic activity.

As I was researching Bodega history for the Discovery Days: Bodega event, I came across references to Father Louis Rossi’s book, *Six Years on the West Coast of America 1856 - 1862* (1863, translated by Glen Adams 1983). I was happy to find the book on the RBHS book shelves!

Father Rossi was a French Catholic priest who was sent to America to tend to the Catholic flock and build churches on the frontier of the West Coast.

Father Rossi worked and traveled extensively in Washington and Oregon. He was frequently ill, and hoped to go home to France to recuperate, but instead was entreated upon by his bishop to go to Northern California.

When he was in Sonoma County, Father Rossi stayed with Jasper O’Farrell, just outside Bodega. Father Rossi told of a sleepless night in a hotel in Healdsburg, caused by the snoring of his companion and the ceaseless biting of mosquitoes, and the relief he enjoyed on coming home to the O’Farrell residence, where he could rest and recuperate.



**St. Teresa of Avila, Bodega**

St. Teresa Church in Bodega was built by Father Rossi on land, and money, donated by Jasper O’Farrell.

The book is slim on details of the events in Father Rossi’s life in America, but it is interesting because he doesn’t hold back in sharing his opinions of the events that were unfolding in America at the time. The Civil War was ongoing while he was here, and he was, of course, opposed to slavery. He pointed out many instances where others took a stand on the subject, which Father Rossi often saw as either politically expedient or financially motivated.