CHAPTER 4

The Beginnings of Tragedy

In 1834 a succession of Mexican governors began doling out Alta California to private citizens. The land grants were made under terms of the secularization act which had just doomed the 21 Franciscan missions. Recipients for the most part were people to whom the Monterey government was beholden. The procedures were casual, with property lines often indicated by a wave of the hand. A man’s domain extended from a mountaintop on the north to a canyon on the south, from a stream on the east to the ocean on the west. In the absence of courthouses in which a man could safely lodge his records, written grants were often lost. A situation was created made to order for the avarice and ambition of rival claimants, and set the stage for many years of litigation.

White settlement of the Point Reyes Peninsula waited until Mission San Rafael was taken over by the Mexican civil authorities in 1834. First white claimants to land in the Point Reyes area were James Richard Berry and Rafael Garcia. On March 17, 1836, Berry was granted 35,000 acres more or less in the northern part of Olema Valley and along the west shore of Tomales Bay. What we now know as Inverness is in this portion. Berry called his rancho Punta de los Reyes. Garcia’s grant of 8,863 acres near what is now Bolinas was made two days later on March 19, 1836. He called it Rancho Tomales y Baulenes.

Historian William Heath Davis ran into Berry at Nathan Spear’s home in Yerba Buena and found him charming but reticent — “an Irishman of intelligence and education”, who spoke Spanish without a flaw. Berry, wrote Davis, spent a good deal of time at the San Rafael mission with his friend Father Quijas and fellow Irishman Timothy Murphy. Bancroft called Berry “a great traveler and a man of many accomplishments” who owned several lots in San Francisco. Jasper O’Farrell wrote glowingly of “Don Jaime’s” performance as a colonel in the Mexican Army during the war with Spain; a performance for which Berry was awarded the Point Reyes land. William Richardson, a government official at Yerba Buena, wrote that “he (Berry) came to me in the early part of 1836 with recommendations from the then commandant of California, Don Nicolas Gutierrez, to pass him over to the north side of the Bay of San Francisco... to select