

Leonis' Adobe--Park or Parking?

Calabasas House Center Of Private-Public Row

*"My name is Ozymandias, kings of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare..."*
—SHELLEY.

By TED THACKREY

His name was Miguel Leonis; not Ozymandias. He was a Basque immigrant; not an Egyptian monarch.

But Shelley — and Ozymandias—would have understood all about what happened to the 110,000-acre empire built by Don Miguel Leonis nearly a century ago in the San Fernando Valley.

And they would have understood what's happening to Don Miguel's adobe home today . . .

The windowless walls of that home are still firm and the foundations are intact. But time and vandals have had their way with just about everything else, from roof shingles to sagging verandas in the house at the end of the half-hidden road in Calabasas.

The Leonis Adobe Association and several historical societies want to turn the old house and part of its grounds into a park. They would restore the home as an authentic part of history.

PARKING LOT?

But the present owner wants to turn it into a supermarket parking lot.

The only thing stopping him, at present, is the city's refusal to re-zone the land for commercial purposes. But the city can't hold out forever, and the owner wants more than \$250,000 for the five-acre site.

Calabasas is next in line for the present housing-tract boom hereabouts.

Oddly enough, commercial development of the land is just what old Don Miguel might have considered if he were living today—and no city or state or historical society would have dared stand against him.

The adobe house was headquarters for his Rancho El Escorpion, and his

reputation for hard dealing stood almost unequaled in a land which was no place for softies.

WANTED GOLD

He had come to California in 1858, broke but ambitious; hopeful for his share of the state's gold.

He found no gold readily available, however, and so became a sheepherder like many other Basques. Unlike the rest, though, he had a head for business and within a year or so his former employer found himself in a squeeze which could only be loosened by giving a portion of his lands to Leonis.

Before long, Don Miguel owned all the former employer's holdings.

Then he looked for new worlds to conquer.

The answer came swiftly in the form of a wealthy widow whose father owned the vast Rancho El Escorpion in west San Fernando Valley. Don Miguel married the widow, inherited the lands, and became the law in that part of the world.

His word had the force of command.

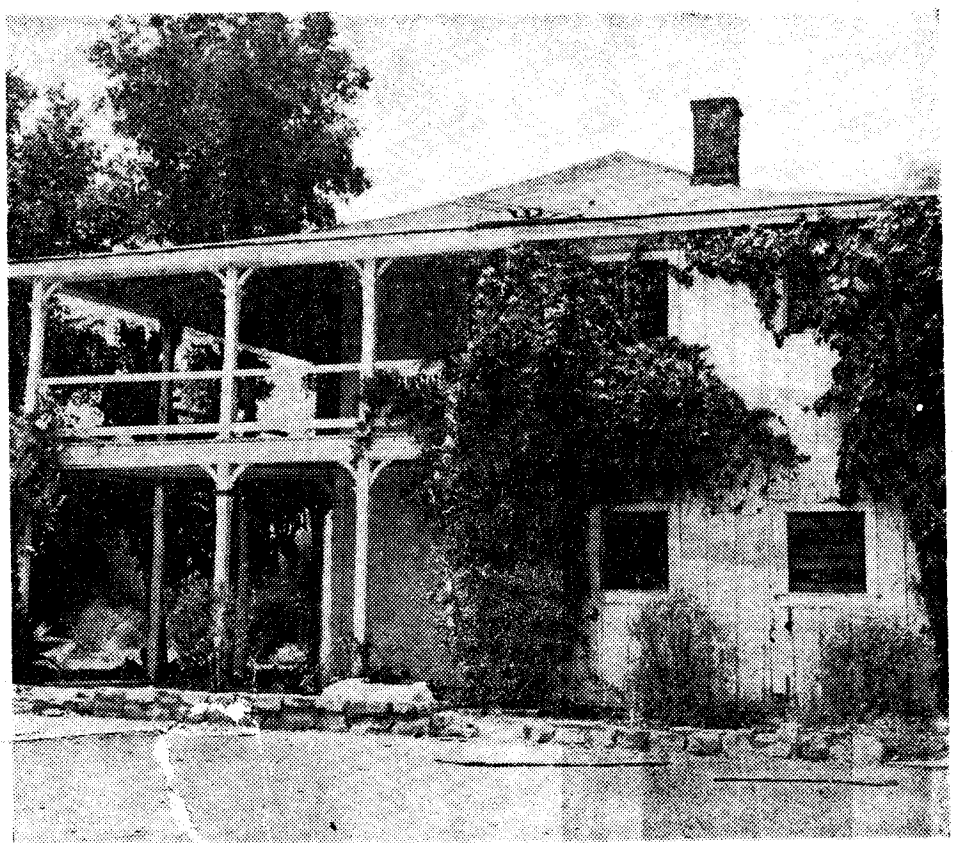
He had a whim of iron. The adobe house was a point of government from which issued orders to hired gunmen and riders and outright peons who worked El Escorpion. He was not beloved, but he was respected.

ETERNAL EMPIRE

He told his few intimates that he meant to found an empire which would endure forever, and he might have done it.

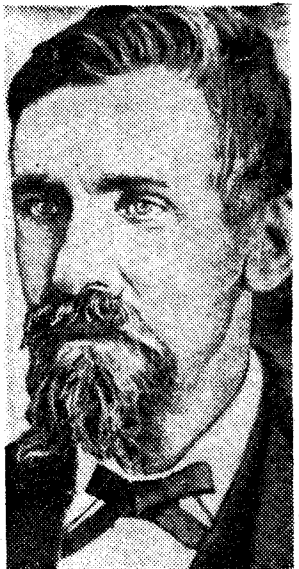
The walls of the old house were built to withstand time as well as rifle bullets—and plenty of bullets were fired at him from time to time. But it was the courts which finally killed him.

In 1889, nearly delirious



—Herald-Examiner Photo

A STATE PARK OR A SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT?
Miguel Leonis' adobe at Calabasas has about seen its last days.



MIGUEL LEONIS
Planned an empire.

with joy over the favorable decision of a Los Angeles court case, he fell from his wagon. He died at Cahuenga Pass on his way back to the ranch.

The Baron of Calabasas' holdings gradually dwindled.

The name El Escorpion slowly lost its dark meaning.

A few years ago, the last resident — motion picture actor John Carradine — moved out of the refurbished adobe, and the vandals began to do their work.

Today, that work is almost complete.

And Don Miguel Leonis' dream of everlasting grandeur and memory will rest with Ozymandias' — unless the historical societies (which he would have scorned) can raise \$250,000 (which he'd never have given them).