

The Charm of the San Joaquin

by Steven Gowin

They say *ehmand* for almond in the San Joaquin Valley. They also pronounce *Earl ham* for Earlham.

The San Joaquin struggles for notoriety but thinks of itself as a wholesome place where nuts and peaches bloom under the Sierra snowcap. Sometimes it is not that place.

In nineteen fifty-eight, Earlham town fathers decided to paint *Fight On Earlham Earls!* on the town water tower. They would demonstrate pride, self-respect, and support for Central Valley high school football.

They considered Lloyd Bandie, an itinerate sign painter from somewhere in Nevada, for the job. A devilishly charming man, Bandie enchanted the community with vows of bold font and vibrant colors, a little magic for the lettering.

But Bandie's promises out ran his skills, and when he'd finished the job, the water tower read, *Fight on Earlham Errs*. Some in the community argued that Bandie should be censured, forced away somehow, but Lloyd Bandie soon did deliver the acclaim the town fathers craved.

The spell was cast when he began winning dance competitions and citing Earlham as home. Down in Bakersfield, in crisp white cowboy shirts, black Wranglers, and fancy Tony Lamas, he proved to be a talented hooper and pleasing showman.

Central Valley media dubbed him *The San Joaquin Charmer*. He glided; he slid; he bowed; he dazzled judges and the ladies alike to win three consecutive waltz and ballroom dance championships at the Kern County Fair.

Back home, in nineteen sixty, Earlham revered Bandie. A waltz workshop packed Grange Hall twice a week. The American Legion invited him to give inspirational speeches. He stirred the crowds and

began offering young ladies and women private tutoring. He took a local girl as his wife.

Jealousies grew, however, and speculations arose over his special treatments, the loan for his almond ranch, cruelties to migrant workers, improprieties with students, and folks' willingness to grant his wishes, to obey Lloyd Bandie without question.

Nineteen sixty-one brought much trouble. Conjecture about strange habits ran unchecked... stories of exotic pets... Amazon monkeys and venomous lizards... an alleged diet of only skimmed milk and bran... claims that he always slept standing... that he whispered in Latin when angry... that he communicated with frogs.

There were dark rumors about midnight bonfires in Bandie's almond grove, wild rants and caperings, naked rituals, and even blood. Then there was Mrs. Bandie's death, and the sheriff charged Lloyd Bandie with her murder. He escaped conviction, however, when his housekeeper, Luz Maria Sepúlveda, refused to testify against him.

Señora Sepúlveda knew all about about Mrs. Bandie's worsening condition, Bandie's insistence on preparing her meals himself, the "rat" problem he'd outlined to her. But he'd threatened to bewilder the Michoacana if she took the stand against him, and she'd believed him. The Mexican people in Earlham knew who Bandie was.

Then in nineteen sixty five, after Bandie'd remarried, and the warfarin with which he'd dosed the new Mrs. Bandie had failed to act quickly enough to suit him, Lloyd Bandie set fire to her house burning off Lloyd Junior's face by accident. Wife two died in the fire, the boy three days later.

These days, Earlham is known throughout the Central Valley as the town that welcomed *The San Joaquin Charmer*. And Earlhamians, especially Mexican people, understand that *fantoma Bandie* haunts the water tower, where *Fight on Earlham Errs* still appears in bold script.

And since *el crimen de este brujo malo*, they steer clear of Bandie's old almond grove where they've seen him waltzing the

ruins, gasping for breath, his face blood red, as he dances to find a
another *mujer*, to find a new *hijo*.

The authorities, who gassed Lloyd Bandie to death with cyanide at
San Quentin Prison, say that he was the last man executed in that
fashion in California.

They also say that cyanide smells of almonds, although in Earlham
they say it smells of *ehmands*.

