

SPOTLIGHT
SHELLY KALE



Roger Dalton with Azusa Bell

Photographer and date unknown, California Historical Society, CHS2016_2229

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THE IMAGE appears rather straightforward: a man is posing beside an old, timeworn bell resting on a wooden platform. A closer look reveals the year 1845 on the bottom inscription of the bell and the word “Azusa” at the top. Look even closer and you’ll notice the man’s hands in physical contact with the bell—as if he is demonstrating familiarity, perhaps even intimacy, with the object.

The letter accompanying the photograph’s donation to the California Historical Society identifies the man as Roger Dalton, grandson of Henry Dalton (1803–1884), an early L.A. merchandizer whose ownership of one of the region’s principle ranchos spanned the Mexican and American eras of California, from 1844 until his death forty years later.¹

A British subject until the end of his life, Henry Dalton began trading in South America and Mexico from the age of sixteen. Known as Don Enrique, Dalton’s business ventures brought him to Alta California, where in 1844 he made his home in Los Angeles, purchasing a lot on Main and Spring Streets. There, he opened an adobe store selling hides, tallow, wine, and grain and built the pueblo’s first wooden residence—known as *La casa de tres picos* and “The Three Sisters”—among other properties.²

Late that year, Dalton increased his land holdings.³ In December 1844 he obtained the deed for the purchase of the rancho El Susa (The Azusa) from Luis Arena, who had been granted the land from the Mexican government in 1841. The Azusa Rancho de Dalton (in present-day San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles County) was desirable property. Located at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, with direct access to the San Gabriel River, it supported the cultivation of a variety of crops—including grapes, avocados, grains, oranges, cotton, and tobacco⁴—and multiple ventures undertaken by Dalton as he expanded his acreage to about 48,000.⁵

In addition to maintaining a residence and herds of cattle, horses, and sheep, Dalton built an irrigation ditch, winery, distillery, tannery, grist mill, cotton gin, vinegar house, cigar house, and meat smokehouse. With “its strategic location, fertile soil, [and] impressive irrigation potential,” noted one historian, the “fame of this progressive ranch had spread far and wide as one of the most diversified operations in southern California.”⁶

Such operations demanded a large work force and, like most rancheros, Dalton drew from Native American populations and housed them on the land.⁷ Some sources indicate that the Azusa Bell was used at the rancho as a dinner bell⁸ or chapel bell.⁹ In this way, it typifies the mission bells in Spanish- and Mexican-era California that called people to meals, to work, and to religious services.

Accounts of both the Azusa Bell’s use and fate vary. “On September 13, 1845,” according to C. C. Baker’s 1916 publication, “there arrived at Azusa a bell which Dalton had had cast at Tepic, Mexico. It was hung on posts before the ranch house, and was used to call the people to meals. It now hangs in the belfry of the Catholic church in Azusa, at the corner of Centre street and Pasadena avenue.”¹⁰

In 1932 the History and Landmarks section of the Covina Woman’s Club published a paper based on the work of Keith Vosburg, whose accounts, the club deemed, were “undoubtedly authentic, as he says he had access to Mr. Dalton’s diaries and other papers, which are in the possession of Mr. Dalton’s grandson, Roger Dalton of Azusa. Mr. Roger Dalton has seen this paper and has given it his approval.”¹¹

The paper reprinted the history of the Azusa Bell as it was reported in the September 1931 issue of the *Azusa Herald*:

The bell was cast for Henry Dalton in 1845 at the town of San Blas in Old Mexico, and brought aboard the Dalton private sailing ship to the port of Los Angeles, thence overland to the Azusa Rancho, where it was used as a chapel bell for many years until it was loaned to the Azusa Catholic Church. On one side of the rim of the bell is engraved the words, “Maria del Refugio” (Mary of the Refuge), and on the other side the date “1845.” On the opposite side is a cross engraved in the metal. The date, 1845, is in raised letters.¹²

“The bell,” the 1932 paper continued, “was used in the church until last year when it was replaced with a new one and the old bell is now in the possession of Mr. Dalton’s son, Joseph, who lives in Azusa.”¹³

In 2007, one researcher noted that the bell—“weighing 375 pounds and measuring 24 × 24 inches in diameter”—was featured in a parade down Foothill Boulevard during the May 1937 Azusa Golden Jubilee 50th Anniversary Celebration. Photographs of the bell in the collection of Azusa Pacific University have been indexed as “Azusa Rancho Bell, Lost in 1938 Flood.”¹⁴

The California Historical Society’s donation letter, dated June 9, 1972, suggests a more intriguing destiny. The letter indicates that Henry Dalton brought the Azusa Bell from Lima, Peru—where many California mission bells were cast—and that Henry’s grandson Roger Dalton (1888–1952) used it in his duties as master of rituals for E Clampus Vitus, a fraternal order dating from the Gold Rush.¹⁵ As the letter recalls, the first few meetings of the order’s L.A. chapter “which were at the Dalton Ranch near by Azusa were called to order by the sound of the Azusa Bell rung by Roger Dalton.” The bell was taken by a descendent of the Zamorano family to San Andreas, Calaveras County, where it might still be to this day. “This Bell is probably the most historic item in Calaveras County and they don’t know they have it,” the letter writer surmised.¹⁶

Regardless of these discrepancies, Henry Dalton’s multivolume *Daily Occurrences at Azusa*, a meticulous, bilingual account, attests to the bell’s importance: “locked the Bell poles,” and “to canyon for sticks for Bell,” Dalton wrote in response to floods and other weather-related maintenance.¹⁷

Whether or not the bell’s fate is eventually determined, the photograph invites us to consider its place in the life of a California family, its role in California history, and, perhaps more imaginatively, its call to us over the years.

NOTES

1. Principal sources consulted for this essay include: C. C. Baker, “Don Enrique Dalton of the Azusa,” in *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 10, no. 3 (1917): 17–35, hereafter cited as Baker, “Don Enrique” (1917), and in *The Grizzly Bear* (September 1916), 4, 10–11, hereafter cited as Baker, “Don Enrique” (1916); Sheldon G. Jackson, *A British Rancho in Old California: The Life and Times of Henry Dalton and the Rancho Azusa* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark and Azusa Pacific College, 1977); and Keith Vosburg, *Azusa Old and New: Being a True Recital of the Founding & Development of a California Community* (Azusa, CA: Azusa Foothill Citrus Company, 1921).
2. Baker, “Don Enrique” (1917).
3. The fate of the Dalton rancho during California’s transition years from Mexican to U.S. rule has been well documented. See, for example, Baker, “Don Enrique” (1917).

4. Donald Pflueger, "From Castor Beans to Citrus in Glendora," *The Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (December 1949), 247–248.
5. "History of Azusa Rancho Accepted by History and Landmarks Section," *Covina Citizen*, January 28, 1932.
6. Jackson, *A British Rancho in Old California*, 164–170, 171.
7. "Aside from a few American workmen," Keith Vosburg writes in *Azusa Old and New*, "labor on the Azusa was entirely furnished by the Cahuilla Indians, recruited from a tribal settlement near San Bernardino. They had their huts (*jacals*) on the hill east of the Dalton homestead" (18). It should also be noted that the rancho's name derived from the Gabrielino term for the native village in the region, *Asukasa-gna*, and the Serranos name, *Ashuksha-vit* (see Vosburg, *Azusa Old and New*, 9).
8. Baker, "Don Enrique" (1916), 11.
9. "History of Azusa Rancho," 7.
10. Baker, "Don Enrique" (1916), 11.
11. "History of Azusa Rancho," 7.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Jeffrey Lawrence Cornejo Jr., *Azusa* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2007), 104; Roger Dalton Collection, Azusa Pacific University, Special Collections email correspondence, September 7, 2016.
15. The group's motto, *Credo Quia Absurdum* ("Believe because it is absurd"), suggests an eccentricity that does not appear to be lost among the group's preservation efforts today. See Jesse McKinley, "Promoting Offbeat History between the Drinks," *New York Times*, October 13, 2008.
16. Unidentified donor to California Historical Society, June 9, 1972.
17. Henry Dalton, *Daily Occurrences at Azusa*, June 7, 1860, vol. 2: 1856–1860 and January 19, 1861, vol. 3, 1861–1864, Henry Dalton Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.