



Prince Andre **Poniatowski** (top row, second from the right), seen here in 1897 on an inspection tour of the **Sierra Railway**, founded the railroad with magnate William Crocker and entrepreneur Thomas Bullock. **Poniatowski**, nicknamed "Prince Pint O'Whiskey," a French-born descendant of the King of Poland, subsequently built the Electra hydroelectric plant on the Mokelumne River. The plant was later incorporated into Pacific Gas and Electric. (Courtesy Wally Motloch.)

24. Prince **André Poniatoski** was born in Paris, January 24, 1864, a descendant of Polish royalty. A banker by profession, he came to the United States in 1892 to learn about American financial conditions. Through William Crocker and his wife he met Elizabeth Sperry—Crocker's sister-in-law—and they married in Paris in 1894. He was interested in low-cost transportation and the use of electric power. In 1897, he invested in the building of the Sierra Railway from Oakdale to Jamestown, California, a short-line that ran fifty-six miles into Tuolumne County with the end of track at Tuolumne City. Later, a branch was built between Jamestown and Angels Camp in Calaveras County. After this project, Poniatoski joined with Crocker in developing the Standard Electric Company of California and in building the Blue Lakes dams and the Electra powerhouse.

from the consumers. Singly, the water power plant could not guarantee continuous service. Thus, for instance, the Electra Power Plant built by Prince **Andre Poniatoski** and his San Francisco associates in Bret Harte's country was put out of commission in 1904 by the bursting of the pressure pipe above the power-house. Hundreds of mines and industrial plants depended upon Electra's 10,000-kilowatt generators for their power. Fortunately the works just prior to the break had been sold to the corporation which subsequently became the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. Without a moment's hesitation the Electra lines were connected with the Colgate wires in Oakland and the mines in

William Crocker, too, had extensive ambitions as well as the means and contacts to realize them. In league with his brother-in-law, Prince **André Poniatoski**, and with the backing of South African mining capital channeled through London financiers, Crocker formed a syndicate that gathered in some twenty mines in the central Sierra gold belt. To run the mines efficiently, the syndicate incorporated the Standard Electric Company in 1897 and built the Electra Power Plant. Poniatoski later remembered, "We had indeed found on the Mokelumne River the ideal site for obtaining the maximum of waterfall upon the turbines.



As he looked for a location for his railroad, Thomas S. Bullock noticed that another person, Andre Poniatowski, was investing in mining properties in the same counties. Bullock decided to bring Poniatowski into the proposed railroad line, where the two could benefit from increased value in mining properties. Often called Prince Poniatowski, because he was descended from the last royal family of Poland, Andre was actually born in France and trained as a banker. He came to California as a young man, hoping to learn from the bravado of American bankers. This is Poniatowski's home in Burlingame, California. (California State Library.)

Built between 1894 and 1904

ANDRZEJ (ANDRÉ) PONIANTOWSKI
A PARISIAN PRINCE DESCENDED FROM
POLISH ARISTOCRACY
WHO LIVED IN BURLINGAME, CALIFORNIA

Prince Andre Louis Leopold Charles Marie Poniatowski may well have been the closest thing that the Peninsula ever had to royalty.

Tall, handsome and apparently French, of Polish extraction, he first appeared in San Francisco in 1890. Poniatowski was a bachelor. According to his story that he delighted in telling, his great grand uncle, Stanisław Poniatowski, for three decades in the 18th century, had been the King of Poland, indeed, the last. Actually, the lineage of Stanisław casts shadows on Andre's royal legitimacy.

Grand Duchess Catherine of Russia, soon to be the empress and remembered historically as Catherine the Great, had become enthralled with a 23-year-old viral Polish nobleman. She soon elevated him, making Stanisław her very personal counselor. But, in 1765, in gratitude for long and excellent service, she gave him a crown and shipped him off to Warsaw to rule as King of Poland.

As for Prince André, he grew up in Paris (where there was a large Polish diaspora). Andre's uncle, Count Walewski, also a Parisian, was the illegitimate son of Emperor Napoleon I.

A few skeptical San Francisco families looked askance at the young man, some even suggesting that he may have been just another of many down-and-out European noblemen who came to California trolling for wealthy wives.

Still, San Francisco's wannabe society readily welcomed him. Especially **Austin Sperry**, founder of Sperry Mills in Stockton and the father of two attractive daughters. The eldest, Ethel, had wed banker **William H. Crocker**, third son of the transcontinental railroad builder, in 1886. Now the family sought an equally good match for Ethel's younger sister, Elizabeth, and Prince Poniatowski appeared to be the perfect candidate. The marriage contract consummated, accompanied by Will and Ethel, the Sperrys headed for Paris. Prince André and Elizabeth were married in the Catholic Church of St. Pierre de Charillot on October 5, 1894. Malicious gossip that had swirled about before the nuptials was soon forgotten, especially in status-conscious Burlingame, where the couple declared their intent to reside. As a wedding present, Will and Ethel Crocker presented the couple with several hundred acres and a wood-framed residence on the hill above the town where, using the last syllable of the family name of which the prince was so inordinately proud, the couple christened the house **Ski Farm**. In later years, after the family had gone to reside in France, a later owner of the property renamed it Sky Farm.

Prince André dressed impeccably, had a keen intelligence and spoke English perfectly, albeit with a delightful French accent. Thoroughly at home in Burlingame, always aristocratic and athletic, the prince became a "gentleman rider" and engaged in raising thoroughbred horses.

Poniatowski fashioned himself as a “promoter of enterprises.” Before long, in partnership with his banker brother-in-law Will Crocker, who provided financial backing, in Amador County Poniatowski built the **Blue Lake Powerhouse**, designed to supply hydroelectricity to the Mother Lode. After that, Crocker and the prince built the **Electra Powerhouse** on the Mokelumne River, maneuvering to create an electricity monopoly along the San Francisco Peninsula. After a complicated series of acquisitions and mergers, in 1905, this operation developed into the **Pacific Gas and Electric Company**.

While hydroelectricity may have been the source of a new fortune, Poniatowski’s passion was for fast horses. As a promoter of enterprises, when San Francisco was about to outlaw horse racing within the city limits and threatened to close **Ingleside race course**, one of Will Crocker’s major investments, the brothers-in-law seized opportunity. Crocker designated 200 unused acres already owned by the family in San Bruno, 13 miles south of the city. for the creation of a new racing enterprise. This became **Tanforan race track**. Crocker and Poniatowski were determined that it be in operation by the opening of the racing season of 1899. Thus, they opted to utilize the identical architectural drawings that had been used in the creation of Ingleside.

Prince André sent personal invitations to the most fashionable families of the Peninsula upon the track’s opening. It was characterized by sweeping lawns, flower gardens and elegant shrubberies imported from France. Horse racing, previously regarded with some suspicion, now became appreciated as a genteel sport on the Peninsula, and going to **Tanforan** became the social thing to do.

André and Elizabeth Poniatowski became parents of three boys while living at Ski Farm. But in 1903, to the sadness of many fashionable friends at the Burlingame Country Club, the family packed up and headed for Paris. The prince had accepted a position as president of the French **Bank of America**. Only on rare occasions thereafter did they return to California. Elizabeth, commonly known in France as the Princess Poniatowska, passed away in 1943 at the age of 71. The storybook prince lived until age 90. He died in 1954 while visiting his chateau in Southern France.

Source: *Mercury News*

By Michael Scanevik and Shirley Burgett



San Francisco Call, Volume 75, Number 87, 25 February 1894 — A PRINCE'S FETE. [ARTICLE]

A PRINCE'S FETE.

A Reception Tendered to Poniatowski.

Many Society People Meet Him at
the Home of Chevalier
de Kontski.

One of the most brilliant receptions of
this season was that tendered in honor of

Prince A. Poniatowski by Mme. and
Chevalier de Kontski at their residence,
1527 Geary street, from 3 until 6 o'clock
yesterday afternoon.

Invitations had been issued among San
Francisco society to be present on this
auspicious occasion to greet the Prince
and welcome him to the shores of the
Pacific. The response was general,
and as the hours of the day wore on the
throng so increased that the spacious
apartments were filled to their utmost
capacity with a representation of the
city's elite.

The interior of the mansion was most
elaborately decorated in honor of the oc-
casion, the principal feature being a
number of choice pot plants and palms,
which were placed about promiscuously
with much taste. Vases of delicate cut
flowers ornamented the various bric-a-brac
stands and tables, while every available
space or receptacle was graced with some
charming object of beauty, which made
the handsomely furnished parlors a com-
plete bower of beauty.

Shortly before 4 o'clock the prince made
his appearance and was introduced to

those present by Chevalier de Kotski, after which the honored guest mingled among his newly-made acquaintances and assisted in making the afternoon a most pleasant one, to say the least.

A bounteous repast was served at the close of the day, which was partaken of by all with a decided relish.

Chevalier de Kotski discoursed a number of selections upon the piano during the course of the reception in his usual charming style, and upon one occasion he sang an original barcarolle which was received with much favor for its tuneful, lively melody and artistic execution. A number of others assisted in entertaining the guests in various ways, among them being Mrs. Frances Edgerton in a poetical rendition of "A Story of the Rose."

Among those present were the following: Dr. W. Pawlicki, Captain Bielawski, Colonel and Mrs. Fry, Mr. and Mrs. Hollanday, Mrs. Hearst, Mrs. E. Martin, Mrs. P. Donahue, Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Tevis, Colonel L. P. Hammond, Mr. and Mrs. Jewett, Mr. and Mrs. Payen, Mr. and Mrs. M. H. de Young, Mrs. W. Pawlicki, Dr. and Mrs. Cushing, Dr. and Mrs. J. F. Sullivan, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Sullivan, the Russian Consul-General, Mrs. John Corning, Sir Henri Hayman and many others.

Mme. de Kotski was assisted in receiving the distinguished guests by Mrs. H. Jewett and Mrs. W. Pawlicki.