

Somewhere in the Midwest, circa 1867, Caroline Hipple was born to a poor German father and a Native American mother. The arc of her life would transport her from impoverishment to the Vaudeville stage and onto the grandest theater venues in the world. She would become the most famous and wealthy exotic female dancer in history. And for a time, she lived her dream life, not on the world stage, but rather on a working ranch in the San Ygnacio Valley, now a part of Walnut Creek, California.

Everyone would come to know Caroline by her stage name Papinta, the Great Papinta, Papinta the Flame Dancer. Caroline was a school teacher when she met a young man, William Holpin. He would become not only her husband, but her promoter and number one fan. Together they hired a dance teacher and invested in mirrors and calcium arc lamps to dance their way to the top of the Vaudeville circuit. Their big break came in 1893, at the Chicago World's Fair, where Papinta electrified both the stage and the audience. Dancing like a whirling dervish, amid giant mirrors and powerful lights, her effect was "fiendish and supernatural," the costume, a "creature of flame."

PAPINTA



For eight years they enjoyed a rural existence in their Camelot. Papinta would dance just enough to pay the bills. In 1905, while working in New York, her world came crashing down upon the news of her husband William's untimely death at the age of 38. It was ruled a heart attack. His grave still fresh, her then father-in-law proceeded to wage a contentious court battle, trying to wrest away control of the farm from Papinta. She won, but soon thereafter, at age 40, she died in Dusseldorf, Germany, reportedly from a stroke. But colleagues blamed the toxic impact of her long term exposure to the arc lights, and friends said she died of a broken heart.

In her own words, "nobody knew who I was...I was unknown... all of a sudden I chose to flash forth, flame forth, blaze forth." And just think, she lived right here in Walnut Creek. Caroline and William are buried side by side in Martinez, California.

By Stephen Barbata, who now lives on one acre of Papinta's ranch.



Using bamboo poles as props, Papinta could hoist hundreds of yards of silk in perpetual motion, creating beautiful shapes resembling flowers, butterflies, angels, birds in flight or sometimes, a satanic being. Their special affects lighting was highly dramatic; the lights were also very toxic, but no one knew that then.

Papinta, with 3,000 pounds of luggage in tow, danced across the major stages of the world in Europe, Asia, South Africa and the Americas. She toured the United States extensively, travelling from San Francisco to New York and back again five times. Heck, Cuba even named a cigar after her. Her performance art revolutionized theater and critics called her the first truly modern dancer. But her fame and fortune, envied by the multitudes, were just a means to an end. Papinta's endgame was

to be "swallowed-up in an idyllic life of Arcadian simplicity." This minimalist dream came true when she and her husband bought 160 acres in the San Ygnacio Valley in 1897 at the foot of Mount Diablo. She named it Papinta's Stock Farm and called it "the one act of her life in which she takes superlative pride." Together they raised thoroughbred race horses and all manner of other creatures. They planted fifteen acres of French prunes, fifteen acres in paper-shell almonds and fifteen acres for a vineyard, while the remainder was sowed with wheat, barley and oats. Besides beautiful farm buildings and a home, they built a racetrack, a large aviary and a palm tree-lined entrance. Everything was all lit-up by harnessing power from a dam they erected on Pine Creek.

"On each side of the road leading to the house a great number of palms have been planted, and the whole place has been laid out in the most approved manner."

THE RICHMOND RECORD:UNDER THE VITASCOPE, 1901

