

EMANUELE "LITTO" DAMONTE

"YOU KNOW WHEN I GOT THIS PLACE, THERE WAS NOTHING HERE, ALL CLAY. SO I STARTED TO BRING SOME ROCK FROM THE CLIFF OVER THERE FOR THE DRIVEWAY. BUT PEOPLE, WHEN THEY COME THEY USED TO TURN AROUND HERE AND KEPT KNOCKING THE ROCKS ALL OVER, SO I SAYS, BY GOLLY I'M GONNA FIX THOSE PEOPLE AND I BUILT THIS."

Emanuele "Litto" Damonte was born in Arenzano, near Genoa, Italy on February 2, 1892. His mother ran a grocery store, and his father worked with marble. As a child, Litto's life centered around the church. In 1907, Litto's father was hired to work on the Stanford Chapel. Litto came to the United States with his father, and then returned to bring over his mother, two brothers and sister. The Damonte family settled in the growing Italo-American community of South San Francisco. Litto married and raised ten children during the depression. He worked as a cement contractor and tile setter in San Francisco and always left a trademark of his work, often a star, imprinted in the concrete he laid.

In May 1941, Litto bought property in Pope Valley, Napa County, and spent weekends and holidays there with his family. When Litto retired in 1941, he began spending more time in Pope Valley and moved there permanently in the mid-or late 1940's. There was little on his property when he arrived. Litto planted trees and shrubbery and built over two hundred birdhouses. In 1954, Litto's wife, Elisabeth, died.

Around 1957, Litto began collecting hubcaps. When he died in 1985 there were over two thousand on the property. He hung up a few, decorating the garage and tool shed doors. More were collected from the roadway, and then people began bringing them to him. Soon there were hubcaps hanging from trees, on the house and shed walls, fences surrounding the property and the cement curbs lining the driveway. Arrangement of the hubcaps was carefully planned and the property became known as Hubcap Ranch. A sign at the entrance to his driveway proclaimed: "Litto, The Pope Valley Hubcap King". After telling visitors stories, he asked them to remember "Litto's Place" when they left, and give him any hubcaps they might have next time they passed. Children at the local school gave him hubcaps at the birthday parties they held for him until he was ninety three.

Litto incorporated road signs, license plates from almost thirty states, washing machines, bicycle wheels, engine parts, tractor seats, animal skins, kewpie dolls, plastic piggy banks, wine bottles, horse shoes, kettles and abalone shells into his environment. Pull-tops from aluminum soda cans were strung together and festooned the place. A toilet was transformed into a planter for plastic flowers. Empty spray paint cans were themselves painted and hung from the house eaves and trees. If anything was left at the ranch accidentally, it was never long before it too was incorporated into whatever he was working on. Local clubs and church groups brought him whatever they could not sell at their rummage sales, and neighbors gave him their discards.

It was not Litto's ambition to be famous, he simply wanted to tell the world that he was there and had something to say. Proud of his achievements, he enjoyed the attention that "Litto's Place" attracted. Since the 1970's, Hubcap Ranch has been featured in folk art books and exhibitions. In May 1981, "Litto's Place" was declared a California State Registered Landmark. On June 11, 1985, Litto died. Shortly after, his Hub Cap Ranch was allocated a plaque by the State Historical Resources Commission. Litto's family continues to maintain "Litto's Place" and a grandson who lives on the property acts as custodian.