

Vaca's and Pena's lengthy trek west

By Jerry Bowen

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The year was 1841. Newly elected President Tyler died one month after giving a long-winded inaugural speech in a cold March rain and an unpopular Vice President James K. Polk assumed the presidency, the first president ever to come to office by constitutional succession.

With President Polk in power, expansion to the West would become a priority and eventually, in 1846, the United States and Mexico would be at war with each other, and it would end with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Through the terms of the treaty the U.S. would gain the southwest territory that had been under Spanish and later Mexican rule for several decades. Many would blame Polk with his expansionist policies as the cause of the war.

Mexico's independence from Spain had caused numerous problems. Many of the government officials who had assumed power were unfit to govern and one after another mistreated the citizens. In New Mexico the malicious politics and unrest were especially prevalent in 1841.

The state of affairs worsened when Mexican traders who held a monopoly, protested against encroachments of foreign traders on Mexican territory. Hundreds of foreign traders who crossed the borders disregarded the laws of Mexico, defied authorities, treated the government with arrogance and contempt and proclaimed they would hunt and trade wherever they pleased.

Governor Manuel Armijo denounced all American outposts near the Mexican border as shelters for thieves and contraband, instigators of Indian forays against Mexican citizens and a constant menace to the welfare and independence of the Territory of New Mexico. In addition, Texas was threatening New Mexico with invasion and trade was in serious decline. These were the conditions the Vaca and Pena families were living under at the time.

The wife of 48-year-old Manuel Felipe Vaca had died earlier in the year, leaving him to care for their eight children. He became embroiled in a trade dispute over a business deal with an American in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Santa Fe's alcalde sided with the American and ordered Vaca to pay for damages.

After Vaca appealed the alcalde's decision, Gov. Armijo fired the Santa Fe alcalde and

Vaca was found blameless. Although vindicated, Vaca felt there wasn't much of a future if he remained in the area.

Antonio Armijo had acquired a large land grant in 1840 in Suisun Valley, California, and apparently told Vaca of the area's great possibilities.

With a promise of free land by Commandante Mariano Vallejo, who was the official representative of the Mexican government in the Northern California area, Vaca, with eight children, and Vaca's godson Pena and wife Isabella, and their six children decided to make the move to California.

At about the same time two men, William Workman and John Rowland were busy organizing a party to travel on the Old Spanish Trail from Abiquiu, New Mexico.

Workman had been involved in fur trapping, and the operation of a store, with partner John Rowland in Taos. Workman seems to have made a good living in Taos, but the same politics soon made life difficult. In 1840 the Republic of Texas named Workman and Rowland agents, perhaps without their prior knowledge, to represent Texas' interests in annexing New Mexico. Although they did not apparently accept this role, Workman and Rowland's identification with the Texans was tantamount to treason. As tensions increased and the Texans began to march for Santa Fe, Rowland and Workman formed a party of some 40 whites who left New Mexico in September 1841. A guide, Lorenzo Trujillo, was hired to guide the emigrants to Los Angeles.

At Abiquiu, they joined with 25 New Mexicans including the Vacas and the Penas and started down the Old Spanish Trail. It took them from Northern New Mexico, across Southwestern Colorado, through South-central Utah, across the bottom triangle of Nevada, through California's Mojave Desert and finally to Los Angeles. Since the trail wasn't suited for wagons of any kind, they rode or walked with mules carrying their supplies.

According to Hafen & Hafen's "Old Spanish Trail - Santa Fe to Los Angeles," the party included John Rowland, the Workman and Gordon families, two physicians, two coopers, three carpenters, one tailor, one mineralogist, one musician, one gunsmith, one engineer (Isaac Givens), one esquire, one naturalist, one blacksmith, Lorenzo Trujillo and J. Manuel Baca (with their families). Following the list of names, Rowland states:

"They each had a firearm which they needed on this trip. The men with families come with the intention of establishing residence in this territory, and those having a trade to pursue same, and some of the others to examine and look over this territory for the purpose of settling here now or returning later to their country."

Isaac Givens, the engineer, provided information to Bancroft's interviewer in the 1880s about the preparations for the trip:

"We supplied ourselves at Santa Fe, with an abundance of provisions, consisting of groceries, flour, hard-tack, dried beef, and buffalo meat, prepared after the manner of the trappers - when fitting out an expedition for the mountains - by salting, drying thoroughly in the sun, then pulverizing and packing in buckskin sacks. When we reached the Mexican village of Abicue (Abiquiu), at the crossing of the Rio Grande, we purchased one hundred and fifty head of sheep, to furnish a supply of fresh meat on our journey, hiring native herders to drive them. Several of the company also employed Mexicans, as servants, who made themselves useful, in various ways on the route, especially in packing.

"We found these people living in a very primitive fashion, foot-loose and free, unencumbered with worldly goods and ready, at an hour's notice, to accompany us in our travels. I remember contracting with an able-bodied and active man, some 40 years of age, agreeing to pay him all he asked - an advance of two dollars and giving him, after reaching California, a hat, a shirt and a pair of shoes."

The Rowland and Workman expedition arrived in Los Angeles on Nov. 5, 1841, the first emigrant party to enter southern California from an eastern-based land route.

Eager to reach their new lands, Vaca and Pena were anxious to begin the 400- mile trip north to Suisun Valley. The El Camino Real, the King's Highway, was well established and was a well-used route and should have been easy travel ... or so they thought!

The once-remarkable mission system built by Father Juniper Serra 50 years earlier had entered into its twilight years. The buildings and churches were in decline and extensive decay.

When Vaca and Pena began their journey north, the highway was rampant with dangers including rough terrain, Indians and bandits. As fog settled over the coast, the weather turned bitterly cold. The nights chilled them and rains soaked their tired bodies. Only a scattering of pueblos offered overnight shelter and food, as was supposed to be the custom of those days.

When they finally arrived at Sonoma, Gen. Vallejo housed the women and children. The men continued on to occupy their chosen lands and to build homes. After three months of travel the pioneers had their first look at their future grant on a slight knoll (probably today's Andrews Park) overlooking the valley. It was there they built a temporary "wattle" house.

By June 6, 1842, they petitioned Mariano Vallejo for 10 square leagues of stock lands, called Lihuaytos. Although they were only legally entitled to 10 leagues, the Lihuaytos Diseno (A rough map with vague boundaries) encompassed closer to 20 leagues.

On Jan. 27, 1843, Gov. Micheltorena officially granted Juan Manuel Vaca and Juan Felipe Armijo the rancho of Lihuaytos. It overlapped the prior Wolfskill or Rio de los Putos grant, and a heated controversy developed which Micheltorena finally compromised in Wolfskill's favor. Gov. Pio Pico issued a new grant to Vaca and Pena, correcting the boundaries, on Aug. 30, 1845, with a new name, "Los Putos," although the boundaries were still vague.

Los Putos was not actually surveyed until just prior to the United States patent given on June 4, 1858, which enclosed 44,384 acres (10 leagues). By 1879 much of this grant had been sold to others. The settler's adobe homes were built southwest of Vacaville in Lagoon Valley. Vaca's casa stood about one-third mile north of Pena's but was damaged by the earthquake of 1892, razed and replaced by a frame structure then owned by Portia Hill. The Pena Adobe still exists and is a California Historic Landmark, but is only open occasionally by appointment for visits.

In closing, it's interesting to note that the grant or grants issued to Vaca and Pena were the only ones ever issued to partners and issued by two different Mexican governors.

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