

Gen. Vallejo's travails in prison, upon release

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column in this series, Gen. Vallejo had narrowly escaped an execution that Lt. Fremont favored. Vallejo and his fellow prisoners were then unceremoniously thrown into their "cell" together at Fort Sutter and their future remained very uncertain.

Because Fremont felt that Sutter would sympathize with the prisoners, he sent Edward M. Kern with a detachment of several men to the Fort to guard the prisoners. His express orders were that Kern was not to release any of the prisoners under any circumstance unless he, Fremont, ordered their release.

Four days later, Jos Noriega and Vicente Peralta happened to pass by on business and were promptly arrested and forced to join the other unhappy inmates. They were given the same lousy consideration as Vallejo and the others and in the beginning were not allowed to communicate with their friends or families.

Malaria, then known as "Sacramento fever," soon reared its ugly presence and the prisoners were treated with laudanum (opium) and bleeding, which only made matters worse. Add to that, very little food that was usually quite unpalatable given to the prisoners made the situation even worse.

Later, the prisoners were allowed to send a few letters to their families, but the contents were closely examined and censored by Fremont's men. No attempts at all were made to provide for an appeal for justice, and their guards lost no opportunity to insult them.

Victor Prudon wrote to Jos de la Rosa on June 28, 1846, saying that they were still in prison and had no hopes of getting out. In his letter he asked Rosa to call on his wife Teodosa and tell her "not to go out nor to allow the girls out on the street lest they be insulted, and to sell nothing, not even sugar, but to nail up the box."

He cautioned her to record everything that was taken, especially cows and oxen. He also advised her that ... "The more she and the family remained indoors the better it would be."

The prisoners' families persuaded Mrs. Vallejo's brother, Julio Carrillo, to seek information at Sutter's Fort. Lt. Missroon, at Sonoma, provided him with a passport to and from the Fort. He was allowed to see the prisoners, but Kern refused to allow him to leave and he was also imprisoned.

A few days later, July 5, Robert Ridley, port captain of Yerba Buena, who had been captured by Semple at his home on July 2, went to Sutter's Fort and he too was imprisoned.

Meanwhile, Vallejo and the others had been doing their utmost to find out why they were confined, and to obtain their release. Vallejo wrote to his brother Jose Jesus on July 6, 1846, saying, "We are not dead as rumored. We believe our imprisonment was only political, and we expect to be released as soon as the permanent change should come." He also added that though their situation was appalling, the prisoners felt they owed Mr. Sutter their eternal gratitude for the many favors he had showed them. He asked Don Jos to publish the letter, adding in a postscript that Carrillo, Peralta, Noriega and Ridley were there also.

Eventually the prisoners did find out that their families were safe and although not everything was normal, they were secure and in good health..

On July 7, 1846, Commodore Sloat sailed into Monterey Harbor and raised the American flag, effectively ending the Bear Flag Revolt.

Vallejo continued to protest and to try to get an interview with Fremont. When Fremont returned to Sacramento he was informed of Vallejo's desires and on July 9 sent word that on the next day he would grant them an interview. But Fremont failed to see them as promised.

An angry Vallejo wrote to Fremont saying, "Yesterday I had the pleasure of receiving a note from you, by one of your officers, that today we would have an interview with you, the which I have been awaiting anxiously all day long; but since this is already very advanced, I fear that you will no longer have time. As much to calm the uneasiness of the gentlemen who share my prison, as well as for my own satisfaction, I wish that you would let me know whether our imprisonment is now ended, which as you know has been made more severe by an absolute solitary confinement since the 16th of last June."

Once again, Fremont failed to respond.

Over time, many attempts to free Vallejo and the others were made without success because of politics and Fremont's orders that they not be released.

Finally on Aug. 1, 1846, orders came to Sacramento to release Gen. Vallejo and his brother-in-law. Vallejo had two brothers in law in prison with him and the order was meant to release Jacob Leese.

However, his other brother-in-law, Julio Carrillo was released instead. The rest of the prisoners remained under arrest because Kern had not received direct orders from Fremont. When Vallejo finally arrived home in Sonoma he only weighed 96 pounds and was in ill health.

Vallejo did not forget his friends and relatives after he was home and after writing several letters on their behalf they were released on Aug. 8.

One would think that after fully supporting the takeover of California by the United States because of rampant corruption and the lack of interest in California by Mexico that Vallejo would have become quite bitter because of his treatment at American hands.

A letter written by Gen. Vallejo on Dec. 5, 1845, to a foster son, Jose (Altimira) Vallejo who had been educated in Mexico with all expenses paid by Mariano Vallejo reveals his steadfast belief in the United States.

"Beloved Son,

"Senor Larkin whom I esteem, wrote to me saying that you had arrived at Monterey on the Chilean corvette the Confederacion which pleases me. At the same time, I received from the Captain of the boat, a letter in which he told me what he thought about your conduct at his table, insulting him and the American flag, besides your saying that 'all Norte Americanos in California should have their throats cut quickly.'

"Impudent young man! What right have you to speak like that? Are these the principles of courtesy you have learned at college? Is that what your teachers taught you? Have you forgotten that you have received benefits from the Americans? Do you ignore the fact that only the depraved and ingrates abuse hospitality? Without doubt such conduct is very bad. I disapprove and feel a great disappointment. In writing this letter I order you that you immediately give satisfaction to the Captain of the boat and I forbid you to ever express yourself again in such a manner to the Americans for you have neither right nor reason to do so."

Because of the constant noise and profanity at the Sonoma Plaza by army garrisons, Vallejo built a new home, Lachryma Montis in the early 1850s that still stands as a museum today.

In the later years one would have expected that Vallejo would have been able to enjoy a better life under the American flag. Although he participated in the future of California and served in many important political posts, it was not always so.

We will finish our series on Vallejo with a look at his life and final years after the Bear Flag Rebellion in my next column.

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