

It was primitive, but settlers celebrated Fourth

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Some of my recent columns followed the story of Frances Ann Copper, as told to the San Francisco Chronicle on the occasion of California's 50th anniversary in 1900.

The Cooper family left Howard County, Missouri, in 1846, traveling first to Napa before settling in the newly founded town of Benicia. Like many, they chose their California destination based on reports received from those who had left earlier.

George C. Yount, who received his land grant from General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo for services rendered, is known to have encouraged other settlers from his home state of Missouri to come to Napa Valley during the 1830s and 1840s.

According to Frances Anne Cooper's narrative, they were "received at Napa by Mr. Yount, who had lived originally in Howard county, Missouri. He was just as glad to see us as if we had been his own family. He owned seven leagues of land there in the Napa valley, had 600 mares and thousands of horses and cattle. The whole valley was covered with grazing cattle. In those days the only Americans there were the Gregories, the Stewards, the Derbons and a few other families."

By 1847, over 400 Anglo-American settlers lived in the area.

A year after the Bear Flag Revolt, tensions still ran high between Californios and Anglo-American newcomers.

The Coopers, residing with George C. Yount, surely met a number of area residents who had participated in the failed attempt to create an independent California.

Among those they met were Frances Anne's future husband, Dr. Robert B Semple, Green Valley resident Capt. Granville C. Swift and George C. Yount, all noted members of the Bear Flag Revolt.

The newly arrived settlers invited many of the neighboring families to celebrate Independence Day.

"We had a Fourth of July celebration near Napa in 1847," recalled Frances Anne Cooper in 1900. "It was given by us at the Yount place. It must have been the first affair of the kind in California. We had about forty guests, most of them Spanish people of

some prominence in the country. I made an enormous pound cake for the center of the table.”

There were no traditional decorations available; they had to be created on the spot.

“Nobody had brought an American flag to California, so my sister, now Mrs. Wolfskill of Winters, made a little one of some narrow red ribbon and cut some blue silk from her best dress, and sewed on but one star, for material was very scarce, and the whole thing was not bigger than a woman’s handkerchief. We stuck it in the top of the cake. One of our guests was a Dr. Bailey, an Englishman of whom we all thought a great deal. He died long ago, but his two daughters are married and are living near St. Helena in Napa county, where they own big wine vineyards.”

The homemade flag prompted tension to flare up between members of the party.

“Father had written across the little flag, ‘California is ours as long as the stars remain.’ The Spaniards took it all right, but Dr. Bailey became very much excited and snatched at the flag. All through the dinner he insisted upon removing it, declaring that the American flag should never wave over California. After the dinner, as my sister and I were driving to our house, Dr. Bailey rode beside our wagon and we clung to the little silk flag and kept waving it at him from one side and then the other as he urged his horse close and tried to grab it from our hands.”

This reminiscence of possibly the first Fourth of July celebration in California was originally published in the San Francisco Chronicle on Sept. 9, 1900.

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