

# Vallejo: the man who shaped California history

By Nancy Dingle

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Without a doubt, the single most influential person in California history was Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Mariano was one of those rare individuals, in that he was born and educated in California. Mariano rose to great heights of power and wealth, only to lose it when his dream of being part of the democratic America came true.

In 1807, California was a far-off backwater frontier claimed by Spain. Born in Monterey, Mariano was baptized at the mission. The Spanish incursion into California was feeble and tenuous. Aside from the string of missions established by Father Junipero Serra and a few military garrisons or presidios, the country was devoid of European communities.

The land was wild, hilly and mountainous and the overwhelming population consisted of indigenous natives, many who had been subjugated and taken as slaves into the mission system and the scattered ranchos. The land was also populated by wild game, millions of birds and grizzly bears.

The missions and rancheros engaged in raising cattle, which were slaughtered for their hides. Trading ships would regularly drop anchor along the California coastline to pick up the dried hides, dubbed "California dollars."

Mariano's father, Sergeant Ignacio Ferrer Vallejo, had served as a military escort for Father Serra. Mariano commented years later that his father was a "brilliant spirit with an unequaled propensity for taking part in wars, intrigues and amusements." Ignacio had trained for the priesthood. He met Maria Antonio Lugo and through an arranged marriage by her parents, he married the 14-year-old. The union produced 13 children.

Mariano's father befriended an Englishman, William Hartnell, who was a purchasing agent for John Begg & Co. Through this friendship, Hartnell became the Vallejo children's tutor. Hartnell took a special liking to Mariano, teaching him English, French and Latin. Hartnell also put Mariano to work for him and later for David Spence, where he kept accounts.

Mariano was thirsty for knowledge and would in time acquire a sizable library. Another mentor to Mariano, was the Spanish governor of Alta (Northern) California, Pablo Vicente de Sola. Sola selected three boys for special attention, M.G. Vallejo, Juan B. Alvarado (a future governor) and Jose Castro (a future commandant general).

The influence of the father upon his sons was evident when Mariano and his brother, Salvador, chose military careers. Salvador would serve by his brother's side his entire life.

Perhaps their choice was also colored by a memorable incident in 1818, when an Argentine force lead by Hippolyte Bouchard, raided Monterey. Bouchard claimed to be out to change Spanish rule and had sailed to California to recruit volunteers.

The 300 or so citizens of Monterey fled into the surrounding hills. Since he could not convince anyone to join his cause, Bouchard allowed his men to loot the homes and then set the fort and presidio ablaze.

When Bouchard and his freedom fighters left, the people returned to find their possessions in ruins. Californians could not count on Spain to protect them - they had to look to defend themselves. This lesson always weighed heavily on Mariano.

One of Lt. Vallejo's first orders was to be sent to the mission at San Diego. While stationed there, he met his future life partner, Francisca Benicia Carrillo.

The marriage was delayed until 1832 because of the Mexican revolution against Spain. Mariano, along with Alvarado and Castro began to dream of a California independent from Mexico. Not achieving actual independence, they accepted large land grants from the new Mexican government in exchange for their loyalty and services.

By 1834, with Francisca and their first born, Mariano is assigned to Sonoma, the farthest northern outpost to protect Mexican interests against Russian incursions. When Mexico won its independence from Spain, the mission system collapsed under secularization.

The rancheros took what they needed and left the structures to melt into ruins. Mariano  
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aw to the dismantling of Mission San Francisco de Solano at Sonoma, cannibalizing what he wanted into his hacienda under construction in Petaluma as well as the town of Sonoma.

Mariano brought the natives under control through an alliance with Chief Solano. In thanks, Don Vallejo procured a land grant for the chief.

As the Vallejo family grew, so did their land grants and wealth. At the hacienda in Petaluma they raised cattle and crops. Their Indian servants helped maintain the self-sufficiency that was required.

There were weavers, iron forgers, tanners, grain threshers, and saddlers. Californios (as they liked to be called) never went anywhere without a horse under them. To maximize his holdings, Mariano was always looking for settlers to buy land. He was most fond of Americans for they seemed to be the hardest, most skilled and self-sufficient of all the "foreigners."

It was estimated the Vallejo income to be \$96,000 a year in hide and tallow, alone. By the 1850s his land acquisitions encompassed more than 175,000 acres.

More and more Americans were making the arduous trek over the Sierra to reach the safety of Sutter's Fort at Sacramento. To be able to stay and travel about California, they needed a passport. Don Vallejo made arrangements and encouraged the new settlers to purchase land, establish ranchos and towns.

When the Bear Flag party, made up of these Americans, took Sonoma the morning of June 14, 1846, they made a special point not to harm Vallejo or any of the other Californios. It was well-known where Vallejo's sympathies lay.

The inevitable war between the United States and Mexico ended with the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe Hildago, in which the Mexican land grants were to be honored. This later, was challenged in the courts, which took years. The expense of lawyers and the loss in many of the cases, spelled doom for the Californios, including the Vallejos.

Vallejo was called to serve in the State legislature. The town of Vallejo was named in his honor, as was the town of Benicia, for his wife. No longer with servants in his later years, Mariano tended to the remains of his estate on 228 acres until his death in 1890.

To learn more about Gen. Vallejo, read "General M.G. Vallejo and the Advent of the Americans" by Alan Rosenus. Past issues of The Solano Historian also provide valuable information.

I would like to make a special note - that this is the third anniversary of this column. Many thanks to the avid interest and contributions by the special people that make research and writing so enjoyable.

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