

Golden Christmas memories of Sutter

By Jerry Bowen

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The following is a very condensed and edited version of an article from the San Francisco Examiner by John Bonner, in 1897. The surprise ending of the story causes one to wonder if John Sutter knew something more than he let on prior to James Marshall's historic discovery of gold at Coloma that started the gold rush to California - Editor.

Perhaps the most remarkable Christmas in the history of California was the one at Captain John Sutter's settlement of New Helvetia in 1847. Sutter was in high spirits, as might have been expected. Things had come about as he had anticipated. The country had passed into American hands. He was indisputably the monarch of all he surveyed. He had an estate larger than a German principality or an English shire.

His fort was the first resting place which Eastern immigrants struck after crossing the mountains. Here they found food and shelter. Sutter turned no man away on the petty pretense that he was penniless. His broad, generous soul forgave everything but horse stealing.

On Christmas Day of 1847, Sutter resolved that he and his should be merry. His man, James W. Marshall, had selected a site for a sawmill in a valley which the Indians called "Culuma," which meant in their tongue "pleasant valley."

People were growing to understand him, and the better they knew him, the more they liked him. Even Vallejo, who had once called Sutter a pestilent intruder, had been won over by his kindness at the time the Lord of Sonoma was imprisoned by the Bear flag insurgents and was his good friend.

Sutter decided that a feast should be given within the fort, which would be remembered to the end of their days. The fattest cattle in his herd were slaughtered and the flesh cleaned from the ribs to make frezadas.

The Indians cared little for meat or pork; their chief delicacy was fried jackass meat, and the captain sacrificed several burros to gratify them.

There were hecatombs of frijoles and tortillas, and salmon was served in many shapes, boiled, baked and fried. Barrels of wine were set out and their contents drawn off in panikins and pitchers.

When Sutter founded this fort, he found the valleys covered with the wild grapes, from which he made a wine that was agreeable to the taste of trappers, hunters and Indians. This was supplied in profusion, and to his European guests he served aguardiente in bottles.

Guests had come from such distant points as San Francisco and Sonoma. From the rancheros along the river, whole families had ridden, the ladies in saddle, their courtiers sitting behind to hold them straight on their horses.

The guests were all in full dress; the men in silk jackets embroidered waist-coats, velveteen breeches with gilt lacing open below the knee and a sash round the waist; the ladies in bare arms, without corsets, in silk or crepe gowns, sashes of bright colors, satin shoes and scarlet or flesh-colored stockings.

After the feast was over and the wines drunk, the party adjourned to the long room, which Captain Sutter had built expressly for balls and assemblies.

The fun commenced as usual with a jota, in which every lady in turn was taken out by the master of ceremonies and danced a few steps, singing at the same time a little verse that she was supposed to improvise.

Then followed the bamba, the zorrita, the fandango, the jarabe, and the ball wound up with the contra danza. Dancing was kept up until early morning when the senoras and señoritas and their cavaliers reluctantly retired to the rooms provided for them.

The Baron had left the ballroom when the festivities were at their height and had closeted himself with two or three friends in an inner chamber.

Over goblets of aguardiente, they discussed the inexhaustible topic of the day - the American occupation and its consequences. With the exception of Vallejo and another, the Hispano-Mexicans were sure that the arrival of the gringo meant ruin.

Sutter was not so sure of that.

He observed that what the Californians lacked was energy and push and get-up-and-get; those were just the qualities in which the Americanos excelled.

"There is another matter to be considered," observed the host. Drawing from his pocket a object that appeared to be metallic, he asked if they knew what that was. They turned it over in their fingers, examined it, and returned it in silence.

"That," said Sutter, "is gold. It is not from San Fernando, the place where our good

friend, Gov. Alvarado, got the gold to make the ring he wears. It is from a spot which has never been suspected of containing gold. It was picked up not 10 miles from here, in the gravel of a stream which had run dry in the heat of summer. Suppose such rich streams should be found here. Would not the find be followed by a rush of people who would neglect the profits of horticulture and agriculture?"

Vallejo laughed heartily at the idea of California becoming a land of gold.

Sutter did not join in the laugh.

"I am puzzled," said he. "I do not pretend to be a prophet, nor do I know enough of geology to form an opinion whether or not nuggets of gold will be more abundant here than they are in the East of Europe.

"But this I am sure of: If gold is found here in large quantities the real resources of the country which I am spending my life in trying to develop, will be passed over by the gold-seekers, my object in founding New Helvetia will be defeated and I may die in the poor house."

One month from that day, Marshall came running in the rain from Coloma to the fort with a bag of gold nuggets under his arm, and Captain Sutter knew that the destiny he had feared had come.

Tidbits From The Past:

The Solano Press, July 26, 1865

Particular Notice - The following parties are respectfully requested not to attend any of our places of public amusement: The man with creaking boots; the woman with the cough; the man who insists on procuring a better seat for the ladies under his escort; the woman who laughs in the wrong place; the man who goes out half a dozen times during the play to moisten his clay; the fast young lady who is constantly leveling her opera glass at the "fellers."

The Weekly Solano Herald, June 7, 1867

An American preacher, in the habit sometimes of drawing upon a store of old sermons bequeathed him by his father, who was also a preacher, upon one occasion got hold, by mistake, of a sermon which the old gentleman had preached to the State Prison convicts. It opened well, and the congregation were becoming deeply interested, when

all at once the parson surprised them with the information that “had it not been for the governor, everyone of them would have been hanged long ago!”

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