

Gen. Vallejo sets out to tame the territories

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First in a series

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Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, born in 1808, was to become the most prominent man in Northern California. He could date his ancestors back to the days of Columbus, when Alonzo Vallejo, admiral to the Spanish King, escorted Columbus back to Spain.

The Vallejos enter the history books again when they located in Mexico. It was the Vallejos of Guadalajara who sent their son Ignacio with an expedition to explore the wilderness of California.

In California, Ignacio married Maria Lugo, also from a notable family. She was 13, he was 40. They settled in Monterey to raise a family. Their eighth child was Mariano Guadalupe.

The young Vallejo was a scholar and a voracious reader. At age 16, he became a cadet in the Monterey Company of the Mexican Army at the same time he was appointed private secretary to California's governor, Luis Arguello. He made his mark in that position by drafting some important historical documents for the government.

By age 20, he was a member of the territorial legislature. The next year, he successfully quelled an Indian uprising. Vallejo's range of abilities and leadership qualities were now quite evident and in 1829, at age 23, he was sent from the presidio in Monterey to Yerba Buena (San Francisco) as commander of its presidio. Presidios were military posts, fortresses, that the Spanish established to protect their holdings and missions.

Yerba Buena was the northernmost outpost of the Mexican Republic and was a lonely frontier; the only occupants were a handful of soldiers, a small number of squatters and the mission padres. Nevertheless, this appointment was a coup in Vallejo's military career.

Though he was a military disciplinarian, Vallejo proved to be a popular leader loved for his fairness and generosity. It was not unknown for him to lend his soldiers money until their pay came.

In 1831, he was designated collector of port, alcalde (mayor or chief judicial official of a

Spanish town) and comandante of the Yerba Buena presidio. He was 24.

In 1833, the governor was disturbed about rumors concerning the Russian presence in Bodega and Fort Ross and their supposed intentions to move inland. Vallejo was sent on an expedition to these Russian settlements to size up the situation. He returned with the conviction that a "buffer" should be established to prevent Russian encroachment.

To establish a buffer, Vallejo surveyed many spots, including the Suisun Valley. He chose the site of the Mission San Francisco de Sonoma.

In 1834, Vallejo was named administrator of the Sonoma Mission post. His duties, as spelled out by the governor, were as follows: To put the mission under civil administration; to free the Indians who were forced to work there; and lastly, to suppress the aggressive Suisune Indians and other tribes. The Suisune Indians were scattered throughout Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Solano counties. He succeeded in achieving all his goals.

In 1835, Lt. Vallejo was designated comandante of the northern frontier. His task was to colonize the northern territory so as to create the needed "buffer" against the Russians. This included the plains and valleys of Suisun, Laguna and Vaca which had been designated as part of the District of Sonoma of the Republic of Mexico when it was established in 1821.

The mission in Sonoma where Vallejo had his headquarters was founded in 1823. Mission records indicate that a branch of the mission existed as far back as 1824 in the Suisun Valley where there was a house for the padre's visits, a corral and an Indian overseer.

In 1835, Vallejo arrived at his headquarters with his wife, Francisca Benecia Carrillio, who was born of an influential family in San Diego. They brought with them their one child and Benecia was then expecting another child. When they arrived, the only non-Indians in the area were a few nomadic trappers and the mission padres.

The pioneer conditions at the mission were not suited for the likes of the sophisticated Don and his wife. The year they arrived, Vallejo built a spacious adobe ranch house, La Casa Grande, erected substantial military barracks and laid out the largest plaza in all California, making this the center of the town he called Sonoma.

When the Indians were freed, some went back to living the way of their ancestors, but many chose to remain at the mission. These Indians were given work building Vallejo's structures. Vallejo had them making shoes and boots and weaving blankets. As household workers, they washed clothes, ground corn and made tortillas. Vallejo

allotted portions of the mission lands and cattle to the Indians, launching them as independent ranchers.

Many were put to work at Vallejo's farming and ranching enterprises. There was much to do. By the late 1830s, Vallejo's cattle numbered in the thousands. He owned 1,000 horses for riding and 7,000 unbroken horses. His vineyards and cultivated fields stretched for miles. His business of selling wheat, hides and dried meat to the Russians and sea merchants was netting a handsome profit.

Vallejo led many expeditions aimed at subduing any hostile Indians. In the course of these forays, Vallejo cemented an alliance and lifelong friendship with Sem Yeto, later christened Francisco Solano and known as Chief Solano.

Yeto hailed from the Suisune tribe in the Suisun Valley. It is said Vallejo first saw Solano in 1829 tending cattle at the Mission Dolores in San Francisco. Solano is next recorded as going to Sonoma in 1830 and thence residing between Suisun Valley and Sonoma.

Chief Solano and Vallejo are often mentioned together in historical accounts of the times. Solano fought bloody battles against the Indians with Vallejo and at other times acted as an arbitrator in Vallejo's peace negotiations with the Indians.

As such, it was in Vallejo's interest to make Solano a man of stature so as to increase his importance among the Indians who acted as troops with them. Vallejo would present Chief Solano in full dress parade with a guard of honor of 40 or so Indians all in full uniform.

Chief Solano, bedecked with a silver watch and fancy riding boots, would be on a horse with silver mounting accessories. Then Solano would fire up his troops with a rousing talk. No doubt it was Vallejo who conferred the title "chief" on Solano. In 1836, Vallejo commissioned him as a captain in the Mexican Army.

At some point, Chief Solano took as his wife Isidora, or Princess Solano. Her tale was that she had been abducted by Sem Yeto from a Patwin tribe living at Cache Creek. She was given the name Isidora Filomena when she was baptized at the Sonoma mission. Despite her grand title "Princess," she and her three daughters worked as maids in Vallejo's home.

Chief Solano was one of the few from the Suisune tribe to survive the smallpox epidemic that lasted from 1837-39.

Under the regulations issued by the governor in 1834 for the secularization of the

missions, half of the land, equipment and livestock at the branch mission in Solano County was to be distributed to the Indians. Instead, in 1837, Vallejo gave the land to Chief Solano, calling it the Suisun Grant or Suisun Rancho, 27.7 square miles in the Suisun Valley.

Solano immediately built three or four adobe structures, one as his dwelling and the others as barns and storehouses, and began to cultivate the land. The remainder of the Suisun tribe, about 100 people, was returned to the rancho to farm it.

A record dated 1842 gives an accounting of Chief Solano's rancho. The adobe structures were still in place in addition to 15 to 20 mud huts supported by poles and thatched with mule and brush. That year, 1842, Solano moved to Sonoma, selling his interest in the Suisun Rancho to Vallejo for 1,000 silver dollars. The rancho operation was continued by Vallejo with Indian labor.

Solano later sold the grant to Capt. Archibald A. Ritchie for \$50,000. The Suisune Indians who had been working the rancho were never mentioned again. In later years this double sale brought the true ownership of the land into question.

Next week - Vallejo and the land grants that established settlers in the area. California falls from Mexico's control. Vallejo's glory days and the decline of his wealth.

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