

Vallejo detained in revolt 150 years ago

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Sunday, June 16, 1996

By the 1840s, the Mexican hold on California was weakening. There were less than 10,000 Mexicans living in California, and they were not a particularly powerful group, as they were scattered throughout the area in small towns and settlements.

Many Californians, including Mexican nationals, were unhappy with Mexico's rule, which was very slack and provided the settlements with little support. Thus, the Union, the United States, was in a good position to win support and take over.

Gen. Mariano Vallejo was one of those who was unhappy with Mexico's rule and welcomed the Union's intervention. He had been living in Sonoma for well over a decade and was more a Californian in his heart than a Mexican national. His outlook focused on what was good for Californians.

He recognized the lack of support from Mexico and its inability to govern the area, and he recognized the strength of the United States. He made no hesitation in publicly making his position known even though, technically speaking, he was still actively working for the Mexican government overseeing and settling the local area in Mexico's name.

Yet, despite his public position, on June 14, 1846, a rebel group of some 30 Americans made its way to Sonoma, intent on taking Vallejo prisoner. When they arrived, the general invited them in for food and beverage. After partaking of his hospitality, they seized him.

The group of Americans split up at this point; some staying in Sonoma and the rest heading for Sutter's Fort in Sacramento with their prisoner. Vallejo was heartsick that the Americans whom he considered his friends were treating him in this manner.

On their way, they stopped overnight at Pena's adobe. Rumor came that Juan Felipe Pena was happy to put the group up for the night and was actually more sympathetic to the American's stance than to poor Vallejo's plight.

The rebels who remained in Sonoma proclaimed California an independent republic on June 14, 1846. They hoisted a flag bearing the grizzly bear in deference to this occasion. Thus, this date became known as the Bear Flag Revolt. Though many commented that the "bear" looked more like a pig, the flag flew for three weeks. Then the American officer, Lt. Joseph Revere, a grandson of Paul Revere, replaced the flag

with the Stars and Stripes on July 9, 1846. This was a sharp reminder to the rebels as to who was really in charge.

During this time, a brokenhearted Vallejo was kept in jail. After four weeks, he was released and in August he headed back for Sonoma. The lieutenant who was assigned to escort him was Robert Semple. The route they took back to Sonoma gave them a clear view of the land that is today Benicia. Vallejo pointed out to the lieutenant that he owned all that land.

When Semple made this discovery, he and Vallejo talked, and in the end Semple convinced Vallejo to sell him a parcel of the land to establish a city, which was to become the town of Benicia. The parcel was five miles by one mile and was deeded to Semple and his partner Thomas Larkin for \$100. Founded a year later, in May 1847, the partners honored Vallejo by naming the town after his wife, Francisca Benecia Carrillio.

During Gen. Vallejo's reign as comandante of the northern frontier, he had established a strong relationship with the Suisun Indian Sem Yeto, who came from the Suisun Valley. At some point, Yeto was christened Francisco Solano, but Gen. Vallejo gave him the title Chief Solano.

Chief Solano and Vallejo are often mentioned together in historical accounts of the times. With Chief Solano, General Vallejo had great success in winning over the local Indians and fighting and subduing the more hostile groups of Indians. Solano could be counted on to fight against the Indians with Vallejo, and at other times he acted as an arbitrator in peace negotiations. In the course of their affiliation, a strong friendship grew between the two and in 1837 Vallejo gave Chief Solano the Suisun Grant in the Suisun Valley.

When Chief Solano heard of Vallejo's arrest, he appears to have been at his rancho in the Suisun Valley. The rumor was widespread that the general had died, perhaps killed by the rebels. Believing this, Solano, wanting to avoid the same fate, fled north. For the next few years, he traveled between tribes in Oregon and Washington and possibly Alaska.

Once Vallejo returned home and had time to assess his situation, he wrote a letter to Thomas Larkin commenting on the situation he now found for himself and his family. ". . . I have lost more than a thousand horned cattle, 600 tamed horses and many other things of value that were taken from my house and at Petaluma." Before Vallejo was detained, his personal holdings included 175,000 acres including portions of the Suscol Grant and the Suisun Grant. Though hardly ruined, his holdings upon release were reduced to 150,000 acres. He also had his Sonoma home and a great deal of stock.

And even though he had suffered an injustice, Vallejo embraced the United States as his own country. A philosopher at heart, he looked at the greater good and how this would affect the greater number of California settlers. He firmly believed everyone's lot would be enormously improved under American rule.

In 1850, lonely for his native land, Chief Solano returned to his Suisun rancho, site of the Suisune Indians' Yulyul village (Rockville area). Almost immediately, he came down with a case of pneumonia, from which he soon died.

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