THE BIRTH OF THE BEAR FLAG
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On June 14, 1846, there took place at Sonoma an episode which has come to be known in California History as the Bear Flag Revolt. This event which is called by Bancroft, "the Settlers' Revolt" has taken its popular name from the Bear Flag which was evolved the same day. There has always been some dispute about the facts of the Bear Flag Revolt. Some writers accept it on its face value as a sincere attempt of the settlers to protect themselves from a Mexican anti-foreign persecution. Others are inclined to believe that it came about as the result of an imperialistic coup instigated by John C. Fremont. When the Grand Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West met at Vallejo in 1935, Resolution No. 12, dealing with the Bear Flag Party, was adopted. This resolution instructed the Grand Parlor California History Board to have one of the history fellows at the University of California prepare a "full and complete history of the Bear Flag Party". This action by the Grand Parlor was, as the preamble to the resolution points out, occasioned by a newspaper editorial which appeared on the subject. On June 17, 1935, the California History Board met at the Office of Professor Bolton at the University. The import of Resolution No. 12 was communicated to him; and, upon his recommendation, the Board approved the appointment of Mr. John A. Hussey for this task. Mr. Hussey has spent four years on the project and has, according to the reports filed with the Board, amassed a vast field of material and is about to produce a master work upon the subject. When that is completed, there will probably be no further doubt about the facts. In the meantime, however, there have been so many inquiries about the Bear Flag Revolt that this short outline of the incident is herewith presented.

The year 1845 found Alta California in the throes of an internal strife. A new governor, Manuel Micheltorena, had arrived from Mexico and welcomed to the people of the province because he represented politically a group in Mexico who were bent on restoring the missions to the Franciscans and hence nullifying the effect of the secularization acts. Micheltorena's rule was challenged by Pio Pico. After several weeks of fighting, Micheltorena withdrew, and Pico was accepted as governor. José Castro was made military commandant. Things might have gone well for California as they had a decade before when Juan Bautista Alvarado drove out Gutiérrez and became the insurgent governor. But Pico lacked both the tact and statesmanship of Alvarado. An ardent champion of the southern part of the department, Pico at once removed the capital from Monterrey to Los Angeles. This antagonized the people of the northern area. Castro, however, remained at Monterey. In the meantime, José Carrillo started a revolution against Pico. The effect of these internal wars upon the residents, especially the foreigners, was most distressing. Law and order had well-nigh broken down, and men were looking to its re-establishment. There were a few who thought Mexico able to give California a stable government.

As a result of this unsatisfactory state of affairs, many looked to the acquisition of California by some foreign power. France, England, and the United States were spoken of frequently and prominently as likely to absorb California in the near future. The people of California, however, did not wish to be a part of another nation. Hence, they (the native population) began to look askance at foreigners. At the time (late in 1845 and early in 1846), the predominant foreign element had come from the United States. For this reason, they were under special ban. This critical situation was accentuated by the entrance of Colonel John C. Fremont into the Department. Fremont was not a diplomatic chieftain, and his acts in defiance of the regulations of the regularly constituted authorities did much to disturb the peaceful relations which had always existed between the people of California and the immigrants from the United States. Hence, as the mid-months of the year 1846 approached, the situation became more and more tenser. In addition, there was bad feeling toward the United States on account of the annexation of Texas and the stand the United States Government had taken on the boundary issue. It was feared that war between the two countries was imminent. A natural consequence was a general tightening up on the activities of Americans. On this point, there are differences among the authorities. The traditional version is that matters became so
unpleasant for the foreigners, and they were threatened with expulsion and confiscation without a hearing, that they decided to strike before they were struck, and hence started the Bear Flag Revolt. On the other hand, the eminent historian, Bancroft, insists that such was not the case. He says, (Vpp. 75-76)

Finally we have found no disposition on the part of California officials or the Californian people to molest foreign residents. Pico and Castro, in accordance with their routine duty as Mexican officials talked of resisting invasion, and even of preventing the entry of the thousands of immigrants expected over the mountains in the Autumn; but they had no thought and made no threats of expelling those in the country. Americans were treated quite as well as Englishmen and other foreigners. The popular prejudice against foreigners, fomented by personal intercourse with individuals, and still more by reports of what had been done in Texas, was naturally stronger against Americans than others; but, considering the imminence of war and other unfavorable circumstances, the toleration and kindness manifested were wonderful....

As to why the revolt took place, one must have recourse to documents printed at the time. One of these, History of the Bear Flag Revolt by a Committee of Citizens, published in 1847, says,

The American and other foreign portion of the people learned in May 1846 that the government had determined upon their expulsion from the country, and were making provisions to seize or kill all foreigners, and send such as should be prisoners to the City of Mexico. A large body of horses were collected, and some 500 or 600 men were ordered under arms by General Castro for that purpose. Information was received by Mr. W. B. Ide on June 8th, brought by an Indian runner, that 200 mounted Mexicans were on the march up the Sacramento River, with the design of destroying the crops, burning the houses and driving off the cattle belonging to the foreigners.

The Mentorny Californian for September 5, 1846, says,

Each man having felt the oppression of the then existing government, and the certainty of an increase of those oppressions, with a clear sense of their danger, their rights and their duty, they rushed to the rescue with one impulse and one object. The watchword was equal rights and equal laws, and they nobly sustained their principles.

Whether these motives are the correct ones or whether as Bancroft insists, the Americans acted from sheer adventure, still remains a mystery. One thing is certain, however, two Mexican officers did proceed up the Sacramento Valley looking for horses which were impliedly to be used in driving out the foreign people. There has been doubt cast on the decree purportedly issued by Castro, but the horse-gathering episode is without question. This caused the settlers to be on their guard. Esckiel Morriss organized a small group of men and waited for the return of the Mexican officers and the horses they had gathered together. They succeeded in capturing them, and after confiscating the horses permitted the officers to depart. Colonel Fremont was in the vicinity at the time, and the Americans were heartened by his presence. They felt that he would come to their assistance if necessary. Consequently, they recruited more men and proceeded to Sonoma to take the garrison there. This they did on June 14, 1846.

Arrived at Sonoma, the band went at once to the garrison and called upon Vallejo to surrender. He was at first much puzzled, but soon came to understand what was taking place. Far from being grieved, Vallejo was secretly delighted for he was surety disgusted with the manner in which matters had been running. The leaders who had entered his house were invited to breakfast and several bottles of hard liquor were consumed. The men outside became impatient and elected Orizaba as leader. He entered the house, also, those outside insisted on things being done in a businesslike manner and, for this reason, it was decided to take Vallejo, Prudon, and Salvador Vallejo as prisoners of war to Fremont. At this point, it should be stated that Vallejo had been led to believe that those men were acting as his agents, and that he was really surrendering to the United States. Such, however, was not the case. Fremont was camped near the Marysville Button. When the prisoners were brought to him, he refused to accept them and ordered them taken to Sutter’s Fort.

As soon as the prisoners had been dispatched from Sonoma, one of the party, William B. Ide, was elected leader. The Mexican flag was now taken down from the pole, and the question arose as to with what standard it should be replaced. The men feared to raise the Stars and Stripes, for they were not acting by virtue of any Federal authority. Consequently, they hit upon the idea of a flag of their own. Thus the Bear Flag was born. It was designed by William Todd. The white muslin was procured from Mrs. Sears. The first figure painted on the flag was the red star, after the Lone Star of Texas. Then H.L. Ford suggested that a grizzly bear be painted, as the grizzly was the strong animal of California, and this was done. A large red stripe was painted beneath the bear, and above the stripe the words, “California Republic”. Thirty-two years later, Todd, who made the original Bear Flag, wrote the following account in the Los Angeles Express (January 11, 1878):

I have this to say in regard to the making of the original Bear Flag of California at Sonoma in 1846, that when the Americans, who had taken up arms against the Spanish regime, had determined what kind of a flag should be adopted, the following persons performed the work: Granville P. Swift, Henry L. Ford, and myself. We procured in the house where we made our headquarters a piece of new unbleached cotton domestic, not quite a yard wide, with stripes of red flannel about four inches wide, furnished by Mrs. John Sears, on the lower side of the canvas. On the upper left-hand corner was a star, and in the center was the image made to represent a grizzly bear passant, so common in this country at the time. The bear and star were painted with paint made of linseed oil and Van Duzen red or Spanish brown. Underneath the bear were the words, “California Republic”. The other persons engaged with me got the materials together while I acted as artist. The forms of the bear and star and the letters were first lined out with pen and ink by myself, and the two forms were filled in with the red paint, but the letters with ink.

A guidon was also made for the troops. This differed somewhat from the Bear Flag. The words were “Republic of California” in place of “California Republic” and were written above the bear, whereas on the flag they were below it. The guidon was also cut from the end at each extremity to a point in the middle forming two triangles after the manner of cavalry flags. Both the original Bear Flag and the guidon were destroyed in the San Francisco 1906 fire.

On the following day, Ide issued a proclamation setting forth the reasons for the revolt and the purposes of the new government. This is reproduced below.

The Commander-in-chief of the troops at the fortress of Sonoma, gives his inviolable pledge to all persons in California, not found under arms, that they shall not be disturbed in their persons, their property, or social relations, one with another, by men of his command.

He also declares his object to be first, to defend himself and companions in arms, who were invited to this country by a promise of lands on which to settle themselves and families; who were also promised a Republican Government; when having arrived in California they were denied the privilege of buying or renting lands of their friends; who instead of being allowed to participate in or being protected by a Republican Government, were oppressed by a military despotism who were even threatened by proclamation, by the chief officers of the aforesaid despotism, with extermination, if they should not depart out of the country, leaving all their property,
arms and means of flight and defense, were to be driven through the deserts inhabited by hostile Indians to certain destruction.

To overthrow a government which we raised upon the property of the missions for its individual aggrandizement; which has ruined and shamefully oppressed the working people of California, by enormous constrictions on goods imported into the country, is the determined purpose of the brave men who are associated under my command.

I also solemnly declare my purpose in the second place, to invite all peaceable and good citizens of California, who are friendly to the maintenance of order and equal rights, and I do hereby invite them to repair to my camp at Sonoma without delay, to assist us in establishing and perpetuating a Republican Government, which shall ensure and protect public and private property and secure to all citizens religious liberty; which shall leave unshackled by fetters, agriculture, commerce and manufactures.

I further declare that I rely upon the robustity of our intentions, the favor of heaven, and the bravery and patriotism of those who are bound and associated with me, by the principles of self-preservation, by their love of truth, and the hatred of tyranny; for my hopes of success.

I furthermore declare that I believe a government to be prosperous and happy, must originate with the people, who are friendly to its existence; that the citizens are its guardians, the officers its servants, its glory its reward.

Headquarters, Sonoma, June 15, 1846

William B. Ide.

When the news of what had transpired at Sonoma reached Castro, he issued several proclamations calling upon the people to help him in putting down this insurrection. Nothing was done, however, because Pico would not cooperate with him. Pico, too, issued a proclamation when the news reached him on June 23d. Finally, he raised a small force, not Castro, and they reconciled their differences on July 12th and proceeded to march to the north to put down the Bear Flag Revolt. But several incidents had happened which caused them to stop. They were not at war with the Bear Flag Party but with the United States. On July 7th, Commodore Stockton entered Monterey Bay and had taken over the Presidio, had raised the Stars and Stripes and had proclaimed the Department of California a military possession of the United States. Two days later, or on July 9th, the flag was raised over San Francisco; and on July 11th the Bear Flag was hauled down at Sonoma and Old Glory took its place. With this action, the California Republic popularly known as the Bear Flag Republic came to a close.

In the paragraphs above, the impression has been given that the historian, Hubert H. Bancroft, feels that the Bear Flag Revolt was entirely unjustified. There are many who disagree with him. One of those, John S. McGeorge, says, after quoting Ide's proclamation which is reproduced above,

No one who reads this remarkable document can fail to believe that the allure cast upon the leaders of the Bear Flag Republic by California's most eminent historian are ill-founded and unjust. If the Bear Flag Republic had produced nothing more than this magnificent contribution to the literature of human rights, as written by William B. Ide, the affair had sufficient excuse for even so brief an existence. The document marked Ide as a remarkable man who he undoubtedly was......

Of much the same sentiment is Cleland, who writes,

Yet the sarcastic criticism so often passed upon the movement and those who participated in it, since Bancroft and Royce set the fashion, is entirely out of place. Morritt, Simple, Ide, and their companions, it is true, had no respect for California law or institutions, and too little acquaintance with conditions in the province. They were also in no act danger at the hands of Castro before the seizure of Sonoma, though they had substantial reason to think they were...If its actual accomplishments were of little importance, this was only because the outbreak of the Mexican War made its further progress unnecessary. Had this war not come when it did, there is every reason to believe that the Bear Flag Revolt would have brought to successful conclusion the third method of securing California, that is by the agency of an armed uprising among the American settlers in the province. In such case, Ide or Fremont might have stood out as the creator of a new republic, the San Rafael of the Bear Flag class.