

The History of the Bear Flag and Gilroy

By

Toby A. Echelberry

The year was 1846, the month was June and, in the valley, where the city of Gilroy had yet to be born was nothing but a vast valley of rolling hills covered in dried brown grass and a few scant trees. The wind blows billows of dust, and you see a few scurrying animals running freely searching for food and water. Southeast of here is the quiet Rancho San Ysidro where John Gilroy and his wife Maria Clara worked diligently making soap. John was eagerly looking forward seeing his friend Thomas O. Larkin from Monterey and hear the latest news regarding the American movement and interest in the Mexican controlled Alta California whilst getting to trade for fresh onions and flour.

To understand some of the tension of the time, a tale must be told of how this catalyst was built. Tensions in Alta California had never been as high ever since Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. Control of the newly born country had changed over many times with inner disputes and frequent changes of leadership. With the secularization of the missions and deterioration of the surrounding adobes and presidios, the make-up of this territory was drastically changing mainly for the worse. Through the 1830s San Francisco Bay became a low priority for the new regime. Bateria Yerba Buena as well the Presidio crumbled into disrepair and fell into the sea as the Mexican military moved to present day Sonoma mainly due to funding from the government was far distant in payments.

The 1830s was also a time of increased sea commerce bringing many new settlers and visitors to the region and many wishing to settle permanently. Newspapers on the East Coast published stories of Manifest Destiny and painted a grand picture of what the West looked like and awaited any thrill seeker or person looking to become a landowner. Countless numbers of wagon trains rolled across the plains, through the mountains coming down the Oregon Trail or landing at the ports such as Monterey and San Francisco. As tensions rose month after month with towns being built to support all the newcomers and a divided government busy trying to create itself and setting up land grants for ownership of the land throughout California for those who were faithful supports of the Mexican Independence.

In 1836 at Rancho La Natividad (northeast of present-day Salinas) resided an American settler by the name of Isaac Graham. Isaac Graham was a fur trader, mountain man, and of recent a co-owner in a whiskey distillery where he worked with partners Henry Naile and William Ware. Graham led a group of Americans and some European immigrants naming themselves Los Rifleros Americanos in support for José Castro to overthrow the then Governor Nicolás Gutiérrez and put Juan Alvarado in the Governor seat. In 1840, Graham was a well-known hellraiser and constantly voiced his displeasure of then President Jose Lopez de Santa Ana and relayed many historic stories of the Alamo. Graham also had allegedly been trying to incite another revolution like the one in Texas as he voiced his displeasure of the current Mexican government and ways they supported the rapidly growing population. In February of 1840, Graham had planned for a horse race to be ran but the Mexican authorities feared this was just a planned plot for revolt as they saw over a hundred Americans converting upon this small town.

Graham was eventually betrayed by Castro who he thought to have political favor where he arrested him along with a hundred other Americans who had gathered for this so-called race. Graham

was locked up in a Monterey jail cell and was to eventually be transferred to Tepic, Mexico for trial and imprisonment on charges of conspiracy for overthrowing a Mexican government a few years prior. The news of this sent shockwaves around the world and soon American and British governments started to intercede and these three countries found themselves within diplomatic crisis. A year later after his imprisonment in Monterey, Graham was released with the support of the United States and United Kingdom. Graham returned to the Natividad, gathered what belongings he had and moved to an area north of Santa Cruz to establish a new distillery at Rancho Zayante.

Back in 1846, to the south about twelve miles away nestled at the peak known as Gabilan Peak in the Gabilan Range stood the remains of a makeshift fort where just a couple months prior American Captain John C. Frémont under the guise of conducting a land survey mission had planted the American Flag and awaited an attack force from the Californians. Frémont and his party of roughly 60 soldiers had been on a mission since his departure from St. Louis in 1845, under the scouting party of Kit Carson, to explore and find the source of the Arkansas River up in the Colorado Rockies and then march down and through California to stir up American patriotic enthusiasm. The raising of the flag was a sheer defiance of Mexican authority as he had just recently been told to leave the country by the Mexican commandant José Castro in Monterey. Frémont looked to have this be his fighting stance, but after a bit more surveying realized that the area was not the best suited for a drawn-out battle, so he pulled his men back and marched to an area 60 miles north of the Sacramento Valley where his base camp was situated on the crossing of the Bear and Feather rivers.

In April 1846, Castro had finally reached the point where after watching more and more settlers arrive and have utmost disregard for the present government felt it was time to act out against those who illegitimately were staking claims for territory. Castro passed a new law stating that any settler claiming to own land that they had not been granted to by the Mexican government would be expelled. Many of the settlers were in an uproar and a few reached out to Frémont for advice. Frémont told them unfortunately that he could not interfere at this time. Earlier this year Frémont stopped by Rancho Zayante and met with several individuals but was quickly chased away by Mexican authorities in fear he was stirring up anti-government sentiments. Frémont felt he was a bit under in numbers and resources, so he decided best to await President Polk's direction and additional troops.

For the past few months throughout Alta California huddles of settlers met and argued over what should be done. In one of these locations, the Old Moon Inn at Sutter's Fort heated filibusters occurred. As each meeting occurred the numbers grew as discussions surrounded the idea of a Bear Revolt. In early June at one of these containing the likes of folks such as Henry L. Ford, Ezekiel Merritt, Benjamin Kelsey, William B. Ide, William Todd (the nephew of Mary Todd Lincoln) and Thomas Knight, word had come that Castro was needing horses and General Mariano Vallejo was sending him 170 horses from Sonoma to Monterey. On the morning of June 9th, the Bear Flaggers as they were called quickly captured the horses and brought them back to the camp of Frémont.

Sitting back at the Old Moon Inn, the Bear Flaggers, drank and boasted their easy victory and made claims how easy it would be to liberate themselves from the tyranny of the Mexican government. So, thirty of them swore to ride off to Sonoma at first light. That night amongst the loud drunk and merry men sat Nancy Kelsey who was there nearly every night with her husband.

Nancy Kelsey was once a residence of Gilroy in a couple years to come where she and her husband lived for fourteen months. Nancy's journey to California was not an easy one and years later

was credited for being the first Caucasian female to cross the Sierra Nevada coming from Missouri. On their trip through Nevada, the party she was with had faced difficult choices and lost track of the trail near Owens Lake within the Ruby Mountains where they were forced to abandon their wagons and horses and continue on foot only with their pack horses. Winding through the narrow trails, they stumbled upon the remains of others who had failed to go any further; some too famished and many to the ambushes from Native Americans in the region. At one point they too were attacked, but her husband took the tribe's Chief hostage at gunpoint and threatened to kill him if they wouldn't let them escape which they were able to accomplish. Nancy, barefoot and carrying their baby girl, along with 34 others in the party, made it eventually to the Humboldt River and finally moving on they settled near Calistoga.

That night Nancy wanted to contribute to the cause and started to construct a flag based upon the crude drawing that William L. Todd had drawn earlier that night where the men had just unanimously voted the flag must have a bear on it. Nancy tore a piece of unbleached cotton linen approximately 3 feet by 5 and John Sear's wife tore a strip off her red flannel petticoat. Benjamin Dewell's wife stitched the red flannel stripe to the white cloth and Nancy using pokeberry juice as ink, printed the words "California Republic" along with a red star in the upper left-hand corner and the bear in the middle that many commented on that it looked more like a pig.

A little before dawn on June 14th the nearly empty plaza of Sonoma received the war party of the Bear Republic. The town was practically deserted already as General Mariano Vallejo had already disbanded the garrison and sent many of the soldiers away as he was tired of spending his own money to keep the Army housed, fed, and paid. Captain Merritt, William B. Ide, and Doctor Semple rode up to the doorstep of General Vallejo's Case Grande without any challenge. Vallejo hearing the approaching riders, opened the door and eagerly invited in the guests into his home offering them plenty of brandy and food. He told his staff to feed the rest of the Bear Flaggers breakfast in the Plaza. Vallejo had been a silent supporter of the Bear Republic idealism realizing Mexico could not manage California anymore and the land would better under the United States control, thus the reason why there was no fight and because of him not a single shot was fired, and no one was injured.

Soon after breakfast sitting across from Vallejo's home in plaza was Nancy and her husband finishing their meal. Amongst the crowd was Julius Martin, who was known as the first American to settle in San Ysidro (Old Gilroy) in 1844. William Ide came out of the house and marched across the plaza to the flagpole and ushered everyone to the plaza around him where when he spoke, they all could hear him. It was here that he then read his proclamation as a boy climbed up the pole and hung the flag Nancy had made along with another one that was crudely made by Peter Storm. When the flags were unfurled, the crowd roared to a level where no one heard the rest of Ide's speech. Later that day, people thought Storm's bear looked too vicious, so they removed his off the pole leaving only Nancy's fluttering in the morning breeze.

Vallejo as part of his surrender asked and agreed for a letter of capitulation guaranteeing that he and his family would not be taken prisoner as conditions of surrendering. The vast majority of those outside vastly disagreed and instead of honoring the terms of surrender, chose to lock him up with all of his officers. Now Vallejo was a hostage of this rowdy band of rebels and felt he was much more than just a prisoner in his own home. Later that day Vallejo and his officers were rounded up and marched back

north to Frémont's camp. Upon arrival, Frémont had them locked up at Sutter's Fort, but told his men to treat them kind and with respect.

On June 24th, Frémont along with his men rode into the Sonoma Plaza, saw the Bear Flag, and cut it down replacing it with the American Flag raised by Lieutenant Joseph W. Revere. Frémont gathered about 125 men who had by now gathered in town. These men were called Osos (Spanish for bears) by the local residents. Frémont and his Army rode out toward San Rafael where rumored had it, Castro was launching a counterstrike. The Bear Flag that was lowered was handed to the teenage son of Commander John B. Montgomery of the U.S. Navy. Little is known to the fate of Montgomery's son, but the flag eventually remained under U.S. Navy control until 1855 when it was returned to California.

On February 2, 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, California won its independence from Mexico. On September 9, 1850, California was quickly admitted into the Union and became the 31st state. In 1855 the flag upon its return from the U.S. Navy, was passed on to the Society of California Pioneers who was formed in 1850 to preserve the art, history, and culture of California. Unfortunately, in 1906 after the great earthquake, the flag was lost in one of the many fires that plagued the crumbled city. An original replica of the flag remade as true to form hangs today in the Sonoma Barracks Museum.

From 1850 to 1911, the state lived without an official state flag. In January of 1911, Senator Holohan (from Watsonville) introduced a bill to the State Assembly proposing to make the Bear Flag the official flag of the State, however he described the flag as a white field with a blue star in the left-hand corner and a bear standing on green plot of grass in the center. On February 3, 1911, after a few modifications the bill was passed adjusting the flag to be described as a basic design of a red star and strip, with a grizzly bear and the wording California Republic. Finally, our state had an official flag.

Fast forward to 1953 where a new bill signed by Governor Earl Warren providing actual specifications regarding the State Standards to include the Bear Flag. California Government Codes 420 to 429.9 define in detail the State Flag and Emblems. Section 420 provides the exact dimensions of the flag along exact descriptions of each item residing on it. Section 439 provides the regulations and protocols for displaying the flag.

Breaking down the specifications of the flag; the white background symbolizes purity and red for the star, the bear's tongue and stripe symbolizes courage. The lone star is based on the Lone Star Flag of Texas, where the State of California became a state without ever being a territory first. The bear represents strength, sovereignty and independence while being modeled after a grizzly bear. The green field represents hope and victory. The grizzly bear was modeled after the last known grizzly bear named Monarch who lived for 22 years in captivity, lastly in the San Francisco Zoo which died in 1911. Monarch had his pelt taxidermized and was placed on display at the Academy of Science in Golden Gate Park.

In December of 1921, the Santa Clara Chapter of the Native Sons of the Golden West announces they would send every school in Santa Clara County with a State Flag in hopes to raise patriotism and pride. At this time Gilroy had a population of nearly 2,900 residents. As you can see even in a small community as Gilroy was, it had deep roots tying directly back to origin of the Bear Flag and California's fight for Independence. Since 1921, the state flag could be found inside most state, county or city civic properties within Gilroy such as schools, city hall or even fire departments. The State flag is held high on

display during parades carried by the Color Guard and a few proudly are displayed in homes. Join me in raising the California State Flag with honor and pride.