

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 22, 1951

An Old School Gentleman

Edwin Bryant, an early day Alcalde of San Francisco and author of "What I Saw in California" published in 1848, and containing his day by day diary of his overland trip across the continent from Independence, Missouri to California, gives an excellent description of Captain Sutter and his Sacramento Fort.

Bryant describes Sutter as "a gentleman between 48 and 50 years of age, and in manners, dress and general deportment, he approaches so near what we call the 'old school gentleman,' as to present a gulfy contrast from the rude society by which he is surrounded.

Captain Sutter is a native of Switzerland, and was at one time an officer in the French army. He emigrated to the United States and was naturalized."

After a series of most extraordinary and romantic incidents, to relate which would furnish matter for a volume, he planted himself on the spot where his fort now stands, then a savage wilderness, and at that time in the midst of numerous and hostile tribes of Indians.

Sutter relates to Bryant and his men, that several times being hemmed in by his assailants, he had subsisted for many days upon grass alone. He also told that there was a grass thereabouts which the Indians ate and it was pleasant and nutritious.

Bryant described the Fort as a "parallelogram," about 500 feet long and 150 feet wide, constructed of adobe bricks. The main building or residence stands in the middle of the area or court, enclosed by high walls. A row of shops, store rooms and barracks, are enclosed therein. The principal gates are at the east and south and were defended by heavy artillery, through portholes pierced in the walls.

Governor Alvarado had given Sutter a grant of land 99 miles wherever he chose to take it, as long as he did not interfere with other grants. When he could not get a guide to take him up the Sacramento River where he was sure he could get a profitable grant, he bought a boat and with a party of six men, several of them Swiss like himself, and eight Kanakas from the Sandwich Islands, he landed and built Sutter's Fort.

In Hildegarde Hawthorne's book "Romantic Cities of California" I have just read the details of the saving of Sutter's Fort. It was one man who saved the historic

landmark for Sacramento ... General James G. Martine, who published an open letter on June 14th, 1889, in the Sacramento Record-Union, and spoke his mind in regard to the destruction of the Fort. In that letter he reminded his co-pioneers what Sutter's Fort and Sutter himself had meant to them in the strenuous days when they crossed the continent in wagons or on horseback and often reached the Fort half starved and worn with fatigue. The captain always met them with: "Come my sons, you are strangers in a strange land, and while you are here, make my house your home and what is in it yours."

The general asked a few dollars from each of those who were unwilling to see the Fort torn down. He was not a rich man, he said; but he would subscribe \$50 toward such a fund. There had always been people who regretted to see Sutter's Fort left to decay; but all they did was to say what a pity it was (just as folks do in Monterey when another adobe is destroyed). Now General Martine's letter roused public opinion and the results were quick and fine. Charles Crocker sent 15,000 for himself and his family. Mrs. Stanford sent \$500 and her husband pledged himself to make up any deficiency in the sum needed to buy the place. The Native Sons "bestirred themselves" and went around canvassing.

For many years the Fort had been falling to pieces under utter neglect. A man living in the East owned it, a Mr. Merrill, and he simply let it alone. Now the city of Sacramento planned to run a street from K to I streets which would pass directly through the Fort. Just like Monterey has done in the past with some of its lovely and historic buildings though we had no General Martine here.

Merrill agreed to take twenty thousand dollars for the property and to return two thousand as his donation. The fort and the land was saved.

In 1891 the State Legislature voted twenty thousand for the work of restoration, which was begun immediately. The walls were reset. In relaying one part of the wall the corner stone was discovered, deeply marked with Indian Masonic signs. John Bedwell came from Chico to direct much of the work from his clear memory of the days when he was Sutter's financial agent.