

April 30, 1952

Bear Rampant

Admission Day of 1855 was notable for the first public appearance in San Francisco of Sonoma's famed Bear Flag. Sam Brannan, the president of the California Pioneer Society, had been negotiating for it since early in the summer of that year, but not until the day before the celebration did it arrive. With it came another flag, differing in various details; the most important was that the bear was "rampant" instead of "passant". It was known "as the Second Bear Flag" or "the Los Angeles Bear Flag". In the middle 1830's the Society undertook an investigation of the two banners to ascertain beyond doubt which was the original.

The authenticity of the flag with the passant bear was established, but neither earlier theories, those resulting from investigation, nor later ones, have finally proved the origin of the second flag.

In his letter accompanying the flag written in San Francisco on September 8, the same day Brannan turned them over to the Society, John B. Weller, who that spring had completed a term in Congress, wrote:

"Previous to leaving Washington City in March last I obtained from the Navy department two flags which were used in this state at an early day by the Americans. One is the "Grizzly Bear Flag" which was hoisted by our countrymen at Sonoma in July 1848. ... These flags although they certainly do not exhibit much artistic skill, are so connected with the early history of American affairs in California that they must be of interest to your association. They will be least serve to keep in remembrance the names of the brave and fearless pioneers who made the first movement toward expelling Mexican power from this territory." This letter is reprinted in "This Sudden Empire – California," a history of the Society of California Pioneers.

Proudly the next day the Society members carried the flags through the streets of San Francisco. George Yount of Napa carried the "original Bear Flag" and J.C.L. Wadsworth "the second Bear Flag". Following them came the "Fremont Flag" presented earlier to the Society by John Charles Fremont and until September of 1855 its proudest possession. In that year fire destroyed it.

By 1860 the year the Pioneers celebrated their tenth anniversary, their library had grown to contain more than six hundred books. Of California history which in these later years has come to be the Society's chief concern, there was the beginning of a collection. Thomas Oliver Larkin had presented two original maps of Monterey and lent his file of correspondence with the State Department during the time he was United States Consul for California. The first recorded gift to the historical collection of the Society was a specimen of copper ore from Arizona presented by Asa B. Perkins in 1851, but it was 1863 before the Society had a place to display it.

At the annual meeting of the Society in July 1856, the membership elected to the presidency the revered old Californian, Thomas Oliver Larkin. According to the notes in the publication, "The Sudden Empire", the choice appears to have been principally by way of honoring him, for he was by then growing feeble and was unable to carry out most of his official duties.

In 1857 James Lick's name appeared on the Society roster for the first time. He was elected vice-president from Santa Clara County. On Admission Day of 1859 the president of the Society had the pleasure of announcing to the Pioneers that James Lick had given the Society a greatly desired gift. It was a piece of land, located on Montgomery street. Here was located the first Pioneer building.

The year 1860 marked the Society's tenth birthday and the Pioneers decided to celebrate the milestone on the tenth anniversary of Admission Day. One of the Pioneers, a tall, handsome Virginian, Edmund Randolph, was asked to give the anniversary address. He was a man of brilliance, so his biographer declares, and his address was in a way the high point of the Society's early years. It was the first piece of serious original historical work presented to the Society, and it set a high standard.

Randolph was a lawyer with his practice largely concentrated upon land cases. With Edwin M. Stanton he represented the United States' claims in the litigation over the famed New Almaden Mines' quicksilver property. Perhaps it was the research that went into his work that resulted in his interest in the history of this adopted country, an interest which culminated in his 1860 address to the Society of California Pioneers.