

May 23, 1952

California Colony

John Bidwell, a pioneer of 1841, wrote an article for Century Magazine December, 1880, which he titled "Life in California. Before Gold Discovery," in which he published a story of the life and work of Gen. John A. Sutter, probably the first article ever written about this man, the founder of Sutter's Fort at Sacramento and the owner of Sutter's Mill where gold was discovered in 1848.

John A Sutter was born in Baden in 1803 of Swiss parents, and was proud of his connection with the only republic of consequence in Europe at that time. He was a warm admirer of the United States, and some of his friends had persuaded him to come across the Atlantic, wrote Bidwell. He first went to a friend in Indiana with whom he stayed awhile, helping to clear land, but that was an occupation with he was not accustomed, so he made his way on West in St. Louis and invested what means he had in merchandise. From St. Louis he traveled overland as a New Mexican trader to Santa Fe. Having been unsuccessful at Santa Fe, he returned to St. Louis, joined a party of trappers, went to the Rocky Mountains, and found his way down the Columbia River to Fort Vancouver. There he tarried to form plans to proceed down the coast to California where he had dreams of establishing a colony.

Travel was difficult in those days. When he finally boarded a vessel to proceed down the coast, his landing was eventually made in the Sandwich Islands. There he made known his dream of a colony in California to people who assisted him. But there were no vessels going direct to California from the Islands, so he had to take a Russian vessel by way of Sitka in Alaska.

While in the Islands he obtained such credit as he could and persuaded five or six natives to accompany him to start his contemplated colony. He expected to send to Europe and the United States for his colonists. When Sutter finally arrived on the coast of California, in 1840, he had an interview with the governor, Alvarado, and obtained permission to explore the country and acquire a suitable place for the establishment of his colony. He came to the Bay of San Francisco procured a small boat and explored the largest river he could find, and selected the site where the City of Sacramento now stands.

John Bidwell related that a short time before his arrival in California, Sutter had purchased the Russian-American Fur Company at Fort Ross and Bodega on the Pacific. That company had a charter from Spain to take furs, but had no right to the land. The charter had about expired. Against the protest of the authorities they had extended their settlement southward for 20 miles farther than they had any right to, and every beyond the Bay of Bodega.

The time finally came when the taking of furs was no longer profitable; the Russians were ordered to vacate and return to Sitka. They wished to sell out all their personal property and whatever remaining right they had to the land. So Sutter bought them out—cattle and horses; a little vessel of about 25 tons burden, called a launch; and other property, including 40 odd pieces of old rusty cannon and one or two small brass pieces, with a quantity of old French flint-lock muskets pronounced by Sutter to be those lost by Bonaparte in 1812 in his disastrous retreat from Moscow.

All these possessions Sutter conveyed up the Sacramento River on his newly acquired launch to his colony. As soon as the native Californians heard that he had bought out Russians and was beginning to fortify himself by taking up the cannon they began to fear him, reported Bidwell.

The Californians were doubtless jealous because Americans and other foreigners had already commenced to make Sutter's fort their headquarters, and they foresaw that the fort would be for them, especially for Americans, what it naturally did become, in fact, a place of protection and general rendezvous; and they threatened to break it up.

Bidwell, an observer of the natural happenings of the time, wrote that Sutter had not as yet actually received his grant, he had simply taken preliminary steps and had obtained permission to settle and proceed to colonize. These threats were made before he had begun the fort, much less built it, and Sutter felt insecure.

(More on Monday)