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Down the American River

Baptiste Ruelle, who had been a trapper with the Hudson Bay Company, drifted down into New Mexico and then to California to become an employee of Sutter, announced in 1843 that he wished to go far into the mountains along the American River to search for gold. For this purpose he desired two mules loaded with provisions, and he selected two notably stupid Indian boys who he wanted to go into the mountains with him, saying to Sutter and others that he would have no others. Off course Sutter did not cooperate and Ruelle did not get the outfit.

In after years John Bidwell and Sutter both concluded that he really wanted the outfit so that he could join the Oregon party which each year left California to return to Oregon.

After the discovery of gold by Marshall at Sutter's Mill at Coloma, Ruelle, who was the first to go there and mine, still protested that he had discovered gold on the American River in 1843. He never returned to Oregon but remained in California until his death.

In the autumn of 1844 a revolt took place in California which John Bidwell describes in his "Life in California Before the Gold Rush," published in 1890. The native chiefs of California, Jose Castro and ex-Governor Alvarado, succeeded in rising an insurrection against Mexican Governor, Micheltorena, to expel him from the country. They accused him of being friendly to Americans and giving them too much land. The truth was, according to Bidwell's version of the trouble, that he had simply been impartial.

In October Sutter went from Sacramento to Monterey, the capital, to see the governor. He was accompanied by Bidwell. On their way at San Jose, they heard the first muttering of the insurrection. They hastened on and here, In Monterey, they were the first to communicate the fact to the governor.

Sutter, alarmed, took the first opportunity to get away by water. There were in those days no mail routes, no public conveyances of any kind, no regular lines of travel, and no public highways. But a vessel happened to touch Monterey, wrote Bidwell, and Sutter took passage for the bay of San Francisco, thence by his own launch reached home.

Bidwell wrote of the happenings as he saw them: "In a few days the first blow was struck, the insurgents taking all the horses belonging to the government at Monterey, setting the governor and all his troops on foot. He raised a few horses as best he could and pursued them but could not overtake them. However, I understand that a sort of parley took place at or near San Jose, but no barter, surrender or settlement."

Meanwhile Bidwell, having started to return to Sutter's Fort by land, 200 miles distant, met the governor returning to Monterey. He stopped his forces and talked with Bidwell for half an hour, asking him to bid the Americans to be loyal to Mexico. At Mission San Jose, Bidwell met Castro and Alvarado, who treated him like a prince. They decided to support Micheltorena. He had been their friend, had given them land and they felt that they could repose the same confidence in the native Californians.

The insurrection ended in capitulation of Micheltorena. The causes which led to this result were various, some of them infamous, according to Bidwell's opinion. Pio Pico, being the oldest member of the Department Assembly, became governor, and Castro commander-in-chief of the military. They reigned but one year, and then came the Mexican war. Castro was made governor of Lower California, and died there. Pio Pico was not a vindictive man; he was a mild governor, and lived in Los Angeles in 1890 at the time Bidwell wrote his article for Century Magazine.

Bidwell's personal meeting with Fremont on the latter's first visit to California in the month of March 1844, is interesting. Bidwell states that Fremont came via eastern Oregon, traveling south and passing east of the Sierra Nevada, and crossed the chain about opposite the bay of San Francisco, at the head of the American River, and descended into the Sacramento Valley to Sutter's Fort. After his arrival he stayed but a short time, three or four weeks perhaps, to refit with fresh mules and horses and such provisions as he could obtain, and then set out on his return to the United States.

Fremont probably came down one of the branches of the American River, probably the very one in which Marshall discovered gold. How strange, thought Bidwell, that he and his scientific corps did not discover signs of gold, as Commodore Wilke's party had done when coming overland from Oregon in 1841.