

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **On Bear Flag Day**

Tomorrow, June 14, marks the day California was born in a blaze of freedom in 1846 as the Bear flag was raised for the first time.

The Bear flag, standard of "The California Republic" was flown over the plaza at Sonoma following the capture of Colonel M.G. Vallejo, Lieut-Col. Victor Pridon and Captain Salvador Vallejo, by the American settlers, including Ezekiel Merritt, William B. Ide, Robert Semple and thirty others. They were first taken to Capt. John C. Fremont's camp on the American River and later to Sutter Fort, where Jacob P. Leese, who had also acted as interpreter, was also incarcerated. Merritt, Semple, Fremont and Leese all lived at various times in Monterey, taking an active part in affairs of the time.

William L. Todd, a member of the revolutionary party later described how the Bear Flag was made: "We procured in the house where we made our headquarters, a piece of new unbleached cotton domestic, not quite a yard wide, sewing on stripes of red flannel about four inches wide ... on the lower side of the canvas. On the upper left-hand corner was a painted star, and in the center the image of a grizzly bear drawn in with paint from a wheelwright's shop. Underneath the bear were the words: 'California Republic'."

The Bear flag waved proudly over Sonoma, capital of the Republic, for nearly a month, until Fremont received word that was declared on Mexico. On July 7, 1846, the American Flag was raised at Monterey, subordinating the Bear flag, but retaining it indelibly engraved on the hearts of the men who brought the Golden State into the Union. It still flies beneath the national emblem at all the schools in the state and at many other public buildings.

Today cities throughout the state are the major offenders in failing to raise the Bear flag in front of all municipal buildings as required by law.

Timed to coincide with the anniversary of the flag's first hoisting at Sonoma to signal formation of the "California Republic", Roger Sagouspe of Los Ranchos Parlor, Ontario, State Bear Flag Observance Committee chairman of the Native Sons of the Golden West,

announced a campaign "to alert communities state-wide to their responsibilities."

Sagouspe, who was named chairman of this important committee at the recent state convention of the Native Sons, stressed that the responsibility for encouraging the Bear Flag to be hoisted at every one of California's more than 300 cities rests with the people. State law designates the courts as enforcing agencies. The statute states: "The Superior Court is granted jurisdiction to enforce each and all of the provisions of the act on the petition of any citizen of the county in which the subject of the complaint is located."

Aim of the Native Sons' campaign is to make raising the Bear flag just as much a part of the municipal routine as hoisting the United States Flag, the chairman asserted "The courts should not be called upon to enforce raising the flag that is backed by such patriotic history."

To go back to the historical significance of the Bear flag for a moment. Early in June of 1846 Mexican sentiment against American settlers who were forging a new way of life in the territory rose to fever pitch. Lt. De Arce, heading a force of Mexican soldiers arrived at Sutter's Fort, reportedly with orders to drive out the settlers.

As the rumor spread, the Americans quickly rallied their forces sending a message for help to Captain John C. Fremont, who was heading an exploration force of U.S. troops and had entered California over Mexican protests. Without the support of Fremont's forces, the Americans made a surprise move against Sonoma, taking the town easily. Commandant Manuel G. Vallejo and his Mexican staff were taken to Sutter's Fort as prisoners.

On July 9, 1846, Lieut. Joseph Warren Revere of the U.S.S. Cyane, on orders from Commodore Sloat, raised the American flag at Sonoma, and took possession for the United States – thus passed into oblivion the "Republic of California." Captain Fremont or Lieut. Edward Kern (the records are not clear) raised the American flag over Sutter's Fort, under instructions received from Lieut. Joseph Warren Revere.