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Wild Horses and Wild Indians

The first employment that John Bidwell had in California was in Sutter's service, about two months after the company with which he traveled arrived in California. He went to Sacramento Valley and took charge of Sutter's Hock farm (so named from a large Indian village on the place) remaining there a little more than a year – 1843 and part of 1844

In those early years nearly everyone who came to California made it a point to reach Sutter's Fort. Bidwell emphasized throughout his writing the fact that Sutter was one of the most liberal and hospitable of men. Everybody was welcome, one man or a hundred, it was all the same. He had peculiar traits: his necessities compelled him to take all he could buy, and he paid all he could pay, but he failed to keep up with his payments. And so he soon found himself immensely – almost helplessly – involved in debt.

His debt to the Russians at first amounted to nearly one hundred thousand dollars. Interest increased apace. He had agreed to pay in wheat, but his crops failed. He struggled in every way, sowing large areas to wheat (but his crops failed), increasing his cattle and horses, and trying to build a flouring mill.

He kept his launch running to and from the bay, carrying down hides, tallow, furs, wheat, etc., returning with lumber sawed by hand in the redwood groves nearest the bay and with other supplies.

On the average it took a month to make the trip from Sacramento to San Francisco and return. The fare for each person was five dollars, including board. Sutter started many other new enterprises in order to find relief from his embarrassment; but in spite of all he could do these increased. Every year found him worse and worse off; but it was partly his own fault, in Bidwell's opinion.

During these years Sutter tried to maintain a sort of a military discipline. Cannon were mounted, and pointed in every direction through embrasures in the walls and bastions. The soldiers were Indians and every evening after coming in from work they were drilled under an officer, generally a German, marching to the music of a fife and drum. A sentry was always at the gate, and regular bells called men to and from work.

Bidwell describes vividly the harvesting season, the work done with crude instruments. Today one cannot imagine three or four hundred wild Indians in a grain field, armed, some with sickles, some with butcher knives, some with pieces of hoop iron roughly fashioned into shapes like sickles, but many having only their hands with which to gather by small handfuls, the dry and brittle grain. When their hands became sore, they resorted to dry willow sticks, which were split to afford a sharper edge with which to sever the straw.

The wildest part of the harvest was the threshing. The harvest of weeks, sometimes a month, was piled in the straw in the form of a huge mound in the middle of a high strong round corral; then three or four hundred wild horses were turned in to thresh it, the Indians whooping to make them run faster. Suddenly they would dash in before the band at full speed, when the motion became reversed, with the effect of plowing the trampled straw to the very bottom. In an hour the grain would be thoroughly threshed and the dry straw broken almost into chaff.