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The First Lawyer Had a Scheme

John Bidwell revealed in his article "Life in California before the Gold Rush" that in 1841 there was no lawyer in all of California. In 1843 there arrived one Hastings who came down the coast from Oregon. He, almost immediately, began to plan a scheme whereby California would be wrested from Mexico and made a republic.

Hasting's scheme was to go to Mexico and make friends with the Mexican authorities, if possible get a grant of land, and then go into Texas to consult President Houston. He then planned to go east and write a book, praising the country to the skies, which he did, with little regard to accuracy. His object was to start a large immigration, and this he succeeded.

Hasting's book was published in 1845, and undoubtedly largely induced what was called the "great immigration" of 1846 when about 600 persons crossed the plains. Hastings had returned to California in autumn of 1845, preparatory to taking steps to declare the country independent and to establish a republic, making himself president.

In 1846 Hastings went back to meet the immigration and to perfect his plans so that the emigrants would know exactly where to go and what to do. But in 1846 the Mexican War intervened, and while Hastings was on his way to meet the immigration, United States took possession of California. These doubtless were the first plans ever conceived for the independence of California.

Hastings knew there were not enough Americans and foreigners yet in California to do anything. He labored to raise money to publish his book, lecturing on temperance in Ohio, where he became intimate with a fellow named McDonald, who was acting as a Methodist preacher and pretending, with considerable success, to raise funds for missionary purposes. At last the two separated, McDonald preceding Hastings to San Francisco, where he became a bartender for a man named Voiget, who owned a saloon and a billiard table—the first, Bidwell thought, on the Pacific coast.

Hastings returned later, and reaching San Francisco in a cold rain, went up to Voiget's and called for brandy. He poured out a glassful and was about to drink it, when

McDonald, recognizing him, leaned over the bar, extended his hand, and said, according to Bidwell's report, "My good temperance friend, how are you?" Hastings in great surprise looked him in the eyes, recognized him, and said, "My dear Methodist brother, how do you do?"

In 1841, the year John Bidwell reached California, gold was discovered in what is now part of Los Angeles County. The yield was not rich; indeed, it was so small that it made no stir. The discoverer was an old Canadian Frenchman by the name of Baptiste Ruelle, who had been a trapper with the Hudson Bay Company, and, as was not an infrequent case with those trappers, had drifted down into New Mexico, where he had worked in the placer mines. The mines discovered in California by Ruelle attracted a few New Mexicans, by whom they were worked for several years. But as they proved too poor, Ruelle himself came up into the Sacramento Valley, 500 miles away, and engaged to work for Sutter when Bidwell was also working there.

We find that New Mexican miners invariably carried their gold in a large quill—that of a vulture or turkey buzzard. Sometimes these quills would hold three or four ounces, and being transparent, they were graduated so one could see at any time the quantity in them. The gold was kept in by a stopper, Ruelle had such a quill, which appeared to have been carried for years

Now it so happened that a party of dozen or more men would travel to or from Oregon almost every year. Of such parties some—perhaps most of them—would be Canadian French, who had trapped all over the country, and these were generally the guides. In 1843 it was known to everyone that such a party was getting ready to go to Oregon.

Baptiste Ruelle had been in Sutter's employ several months when one day he came to Sutter, showed him a few small particles of gold, and said he had found them on the American River, and he wanted to go far into the mountains on that stream to prospect for gold.

Tomorrow we will continue the story of gold in California before the gold rush.