

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

February 23, 1953

Battle of Natividad

Traveling up the old Natividad-San Juan stage road a few miles above Sugar Loaf mountain, an observing motorist may view the remains of what was once to be seen at Vergeles, a rancho owned by Jose Joaquin Gomez.

It was on this rancho, about one mile south of the home of Gomez, at a place now called The Legunita, that the Battle of Natividad occurred, Nov. 16, 1846, resulting in the death of five of Gen Fremont's soldiers. These soldiers are buried on a little knoll about 200 yards due west of the old Gomez adobe.

Victor Mossop of Monterey, always interested in history, especially that which pertains to Monterey and San Benito Counties, has been doubly interested in interesting other persons and organizations in placing a suitable marker in this old established cemetery – there because of necessity and in the cause of establishing a State of California – the graves of men who gave their lives during a final conquest.

The Monterey County Historical Society of which Mrs. Donald Davies Jr., of Salinas is the president, is also deeply concerned about the matter and the membership have discussed the possibilities of designing and placing an appropriate marker on the spot of the burials or as nearby as possible. The proposed observance might also be of interest to the members of the Monterey History and Art Association, and the two historical organizations could co-operate in this worthwhile project. The State Parks Commission might even be interested in participating.

To those not familiar with early California history it might be well to repeat here the happenings which led up to the "battle" and the results.

Commodore Stockton had ordered Fremont's battalion, which had been recruited to 160 men, to proceed to the south, to cooperate with him in quelling the rebellion, which he was convinced was a serious affair. But shortly Fremont learned of Mervine's defeat and also that there were no horses to be procured in Southern California, so the schooner "Sterling" put about and the battalion was landed at Monterey, October 28.

Manuel Castro was made commandante of the military forces of the north. Fremont, now raised to the rank of

Lt. Col. In the regular army with headquarters in Monterey, was rapidly mobilizing his motley collection of recruits into a formidable force.

Officers and men were scouring the country for recruits, horses, accouterments and supplies. Two of these recruiting squads encountered the enemy in considerable force and an engagement still known as the Battle of Natividad ensued. To this day there is a tiny community of three or four buildings at the site, known as Natividad.

Captain Charles Burroughs with 34 men and 200 horses, recruited at Sacramento, arrived at San Juan Bautista, Nov. 15, on his way to Monterey, on the same day that Capt. Thompson, with about the same number of men recruited at San Jose, reached San Juan. The Californians, with the design of capturing the horses, made a night march from their camp on the Salinas.

At the Gomez rancho the untrained army of Californians took prisoner, Thomas Oliver Larkin, the American consul, who was on his way from Monterey to Yerba Buena (San Francisco) on official business. On the morning of the 16th the Americans began their march to Monterey. At the Gomez Rancho their advance learned of the presence of the enemy, and of the capture of Larkin. Immediately a squad of six of eight scouts was sent out to find the Californians. The scouts encountered a detachment of Castro forces at Encinalitos (Little Oaks) and a fight ensued. The main body of the enemy came up and surrounded the grove of oaks.

The scouts, though greatly outnumbered, were well armed, reports Guinn in his history of Monterey and San Benito Counties. The Americans, badly mounted, were soon strung out in an irregular line. The Californians, who made a feint of retreating, turned and attacked with rigor. Capt. Burroughs and four or five others were killed. The straggling line fell back on the main body and the Californians, having expended their ammunition, retreated. The loss in killed and wounded amounted to 12 to 15 on each side.

(To be Continued)