

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The Battle Of Natividad**

Traveling up the old Natividad-San Juan stage road a few miles above Sugar Loaf mountain one can see the remains of what has been at Vergeles, owned by Jose Joaquin Gomez.

It was on this ranch, about one mile south of the house, 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 men are buried on a little knoll about 200 yards due west of the remains of the old Gomez house. Victor Mossop has told us of the location and has offered to take us there to examine the site for ourselves. During these delightful winter days, such a trip would be most interesting from an historical standpoint.

On Oct. 23, 1846, Flores had appointed Manuel Castro to a position of Commandante in the north. Castro moved north and arrived in the vicinity of Soledad on the Salinas river about Nov. 12 with well over 100 men. On the night of Nov. 15, a Castro detachment captured Thomas Oliver Larkin, the American consul, at the ranch of Jose Joaquin Gomez. The ranch was on the old mission trail between Monterey and San Juan Bautista missions, and Larkin had been en route to Yerba Buena (San Francisco). Larkin was escorted to Castro's camp and was taken south after the Battle of Natividad which followed.

The rancho was granted by the Mexican government to Jose Joaquin Gomez in 1835. and was named Vergeles, meaning flower garden. The remains of the two-story house and adobe corrals can still be seen in a little swale on the north side of the valley, just above the junction of Gabilan and Mud creeks, according to Mr. Mossop. As the Gomez house was on the direct trail north, it was the stopping place of many of the notable men of that day, including Thomas O. Larkin. Lt. Ord, Lt. Sherman (both became noted generals later) and others.

General Sherman, writing his memoirs in later life, described a stop he made at the ranch :

"I can well recall that Ord and I, impatient to look inland, got permission and started for Mission San Juan Bautista. Mounted on horses, and with our carbines, we took the road by El Toro . . . In the morning we crossed

the Salinas Plains, about 15 miles of level ground, taking a shot occasionally at wild geese, which abounded there, and entering the well-wooded valley that comes out from the foot of the Gavillano.

"We had cruised about all day, and it was almost dark when we reached the house of Senor Gomez. His house was a two-story adobe and had a fence in front. It could not be seen until within a few yards. We hitched our horses to the fence in front and went in just as Gomez was about to sit down to a tempting supper of stewed hare and tortillas.

"We were officers and caballeros and could not be ignored. After turning our horses to grass, at his invitation we joined him at supper. The allowance, though ample for one was rather short for three, and I thought the Spanish grandiloquent politeness of Gomez, who was fat and old, was not over cordial.

"However down we sat, and I was helped to a dish of rabbit, with what I thought to be an abundant sauce of tomato. Taking a good mouthful. I felt as though I had taken liquid fire; the tomato was chili Colorado, or red pepper, of the purist kind. It nearly killed me. and I saw Gomez' eyes twinkle, for he saw that his share of supper was increased. I contented myself with bits of the meat, and an abundant supply of tortillas.

"Ord was better case-hardened and stood it better. We stayed at Gomez' that night, sleeping, as did all, on the ground, and the next morning we crossed the hill by the bridlepath to the old Mission San Juan Bautista."

We have been told that the Monterey County Historical Society has completed arrangements to place a marker near the spot where the Battle of Navidad took place, in memory of the soldiers who died there.