

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Story of a Battle

The 112th anniversary of the historic Battle of Natividad was observed last Sunday at the scene of battle at the intersection of the old San Juan and Crazy Horse Canyon roads, when a bronze tablet was unveiled honoring the event and the men who lost their lives in the battle. The plaque was placed by the California State Park Commission in cooperation with the Monterey County Historical Society and Monterey County.

The program was arranged by Mrs. Donald Davies, historical society president. Col. Fred B. Rogers (USA-ret) was the speaker of the day. Now a resident of San Francisco, he spends his time in collecting California memorabilia and highlighted his talk with incidents and history of the Battle of Natividad.

In mid-November 1846, the war between the United States and Mexico was in progress. To the Navy's Commodore Robert F. Stockton and to Maj. John C. Fremont of the Army the situation seemed well in hand when in September they had returned to Northern California after a decisive campaign in the south.

Then, Colonel Rogers explained in his talk Sunday, there took place a series of reverses and the Americans lost control. Stockton sent additional forces by sea under Capt. William Mervine, but he also was defeated in his advance on Los Angeles.

Fremont came down from San Francisco bay with 160 men of his California Battalion on the merchantman Sterling and put into Monterey when he learned of the defeat. Here he learned that he had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He began recruiting men, horses, equipment and other supplies.

Meanwhile, Colonel Rogers continued, Manuel Castro, a Californian who had broken his parole, was made commandant for Northern California. He gathered forces as he moved north and on Nov. 12 was in the vicinity of Soledad with considerably over 100 men, determined to deprive Fremont of as many horses as possible.

Consul Thomas Oliver Larkin, en route from Monterey to Yerba Buena, on Nov. 15, stopped at the Gomez rancho for the night. He was awakened by the noise of a Castro detachment and was soon hustled off as a prisoner to the Castro camp.

On that date there also arrived at San Juan Bautista. two groups hastily gathered for service with Fremont. One, from Sacramento, consisting of about 34 emigrants, 10 Walla Walla Indians, and two Delawares, under command of Capt. Charles D. Burrass. He was also escorting 500 horses for Fremont at Monterey. The second group, under Capt. Bluford K. Thompson, numbered about 35 men.

It is recorded that on the morning of Nov. 16th, Burrass, with his party, horses, and a small cannon, moved west through the Gabilan range. Thompson left most of his men at San Juan and departed with a few of them for Monterey by another route. When they neared the Gomez adobe, they were sighted by a pair of Castro's men. Soon they were chased by more of Castro's men, but escaped toward San Juan and were able to send a warning to Burrass.

After much intrigue, hiding, scouting, and exchanging information, Burrass corralled his horses in a hollow below the Gomez ranch house and prepared as best he could for defense.

Back at San Juan, according to Colonel Rogers' talk on Sunday, the unsuspecting men of Thompson's company were variously engaged when someone saw a rider coming rapidly out of the hills to the south. It was Thompson, their captain, who shouted: "Saddle up; drive in the caballada; get your horses; we're going to have to fight. Hip-ya!" Soon everyone was tearing through the pass, "yelling, like Comanches," with bareheaded Thompson in the lead on his iron-grey stud. Much of the gear came loose and was strewn along the way. Finally, all joined forces with Burrass.

One of Thompson's officers named Foster had been killed in the earlier fight by a ball which struck him in the temple, and one of his command, Hayes, was wounded but kept on firing with his own and Foster's gun. Several Californians were killed in the oak grove fight, and the Delawares had scalps to prove it. The color bearer, Juan Ignacio Cantua, and several Californians were wounded but were "raised up" by their comrades and carried off the field with a fine display of horsemanship. The cannon brought by Burrass was found useless since no charges had been prepared for it.

We will continue the story of the Battle of Natividad as told by Colonel Rogers and as history has recorded it, on Monday.