

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California And The War

The centennial observance of Civil War days will end with the beginning of the new year, so we will wind up our several discussions of those historical times with a last article entitled "California and the Civil War" as supplied by Lt. Col. Harold H. Stirling Jr., U.S. Marine Corps, of the Naval Postgraduate School. He had written the paper as part of his program of study and we were delighted to see these notations in red pencil "a very scholarly paper, well organized and intelligently presented," ending with a big "A," underlined.

The paper was prepared for the purpose of presenting a condensed consideration of California's history during the Civil War and the decade immediately preceding that conflict, the writer informs the reader.

The Compromise of 1850 admitted California to the Union as a free state, therefore California's involvement in the Civil War dates from that time and relations between the North and the South gradually deteriorated. The election of Lincoln finally triggered secession by the South.

Any understanding of California's history from 1861 to 1865 depends upon a grasp of the events and forces at work in the state between 1850 and 1860. The voters all were in the mining counties and the cities of Northern and Central California; the majority were for antislavery, with Southern California sparsely populated by pro-slavery Southerners.

Several attempts had been made to divide the State, the first during the constitutional convention in Monterey. A later effort was made during 1854-1855. The 1859 "Pico Law" would have created the Territory of Colorado from Southern California. This was approved locally by the legislature, but Washington disapproved, and it was lost in a real threat of Southern secession.

From 1851 to 1861, the state was controlled almost entirely by the pro-slavery wing of Democratic party, Fremont and Gwin, both Southerners, were the first California senators. Fremont was succeeded by John B. Weller. David Broderick headed the anti-slavery faction and finally was elected senator. In the fight over control of patronage, Broderick accepted a challenge to a duel and was killed by Judge Terry of the State Supreme

Court. His death split the Democratic party and gave the state to Lincoln in 1860.

Even though a state, California in 1881 still was physically isolated from the rest of the Union with Oregon. The first transcontinental railroad had not been built, Col. Stirling writes, the telegram came only as far as Nebraska territory, mail required 10 days by Pony Express and travel to the Pacific Coast still was arduous. In January 1861, the legislature voted to support the Union and the Constitution.

Sentiment was divided in the state at the outbreak of the war. Southern California favored secession. The San Joaquin Valley and certain influential groups in San Francisco also were pro-Southern. The rest of the population either supported the government or tended to be indifferent, if not isolationist. Thomas Starr King and his followers were ardent supporters, some voters opposed secession; some favored war, and some were opposed to both. One group, led by Gov. Weller, again tried to create an independent Pacific Republic.

The state's participation in the war was limited, many Southerners returned to their native states. One of these was Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, who prevented seizure of Benicia Arsenal. Between 15,000 and 16,000 men were enlisted as volunteers. The "California Hundred" was the first unit to go east. The California Cavalry Battalion was the only other organization to fight east of the Mississippi. The remainder were formed into cavalry, infantry and independent battalion units and kept in the state. Small detachments were used as mail guards in Utah and to protect Yuma Pass.

The Emancipation-Proclamation caused some trouble. Most newspapers supported the President's action; some did not and were promptly barred from the mails. Editors of the Visalia Equal Rights Expositor were so abusive they were jailed, and the plant and files were destroyed reportedly by soldiers in March 1863.

Confederate sympathizers made one abortive attempt to help the South. Benicia Arsenal, Alcatraz, Fort Point and the San Francisco mint were to be seized. The privateer "J. M. Chapman" was to be fitted out and sent to sea from San Francisco to prey on coastal shipping. The plot failed, and although the conspirators were tried and convicted, their political connections helped keep them from serving their sentences. California's senators, representatives, legislature, judiciary, and

governors generally supported President Lincoln throughout the war.

From the above outline Col. Stirling goes on to give an account of "California and the Civil War."