

THE CONQUEST OF LOS ANGELES

By Corinne King Wright

The early history of the City of the Queen of Angels reads like a melodrama. Its annals record tragedy alternating with comedy, political intrigues with military blunders, chivalrous courage with designing cowardice; in fact, upon its soil, the roles in a great human drama have been played by the Indian, the Californian, the Spaniard, and the American.

At the time of the American occupation there were 1500 Californians living about the plaza and on the neighboring ranchos. The city had been under the Mexican régime about a quarter of a century when, on July 7, 1846, upon the receipt of the news of war with Mexico, Commodore Sloat, complying with the orders of his government, hoisted the Stars and Stripes over Monterey.

Previous to his action, the Commodore had addressed a conciliatory note to the Californians.¹ This communication was well received by the "gente de razon," for after years of revolution and friction, the intelligent inhabitants were in a receptive mood when promised a stable government with local independence. Unfortunately, however, upon the arrival of Commodore Stockton, a few days later, the ranking officer, owing to ill-health, transferred his command and sailed away. The departure of Sloat was the signal for an immediate change of policy on the part of his successor. Whatever good had been accomplished was hastily undone by Stockton in an offensive and untruthful pronunciamiento.

Los Angeles was the capital under the régime of Pio Pico. It is known that the news of hostilities with Mexico had been brought to the Governor by Covarrubias before July 3 and that the Mexican officials had sought to meet the changed conditions.

The Californians were far from being a united people. There had been for some time a bitter feud between the authority as represented by the Comandante of the military forces, José Castro, and the authority as represented by the civil governor.

Upon the receipt of the proclamation of Commodore

1. Bancroft, H. H., History of California, V, 231.

Sloat, Governor Pico convoked the Assembly, July 24, and addressed the members in a patriotic and dignified speech.² He buried his animosities toward Castro, who, upon receiving a letter from Commodore Sloat inviting a conference, had come South to consult with the Governor.

At this time, only the lower classes showed any hatred toward the Yankee invader. The Mexican Government, as represented by its officials, had lost both the credit and the confidence of the intelligent citizens.

Judging by contemporary letters, the people were apathetic toward the Mexican cause. The well-to-do rancheros gave supplies, but not in large quantities; the Indians were hostile, and men could not be spared from the ranchos; the educated Spaniards and Californians were tired of the continual repetition of revolutions and felt that a strong government was the only solution of the difficulties which beset them. (Juan Bandini and Santiago Arguello were two prominent citizens who openly espoused the cause of the Americans.) The friction which had long existed between the state and military departments was repeated in the attitude of the officers and men of the militia who refused to serve under the regular officers. General Castro in a letter to Don Antonio F. Coronel, urged him to assemble his company.³ The Don in his "Cosas de California" tells of a conference which lasted all day before the militia men consented to serve under General Castro. In all about 100 militia men were added to the force of 161 regulars whom Castro had brought from Monterey to Los Angeles.

Contrary to the policy of the Government of the United States, which contemplated only the occupation of the coast towns, and a future conquest of the interior by a policy of patience and conciliation—as the belated orders from Washington reveal—Commodore Stockton began an aggressive policy. Accompanied by Consul Thomas O. Larkin, and three hundred fifty troops, the Commodore arrived at San Pedro, August 6, and landed the marines for drill.

Mr. Larkin used his influence with the prominent Americans who had become Mexican citizens,—among them Abel Stearns,—counselling submission on the part of the Californians, and inviting communication with the leading men of the pueblo.

2. Coronel Docs. MS. No. 143.
3. Coronel Docs. MS. No. 245.

Accordingly, two commissioners, Pablo de la Guerra and José M. Flores, upon the assurance of their personal safety, came to San Pedro with a letter from General Castro in which the General stated that, "wishing with the Governor to avoid all the disasters that follow a war, it has appeared convenient to send to your Excellency to know your desires, under the conception that whatever conference may take place, it must be on the basis that all hostile movements must be suspended."⁴

In his report, the Commodore states that, "before, however, they could communicate the extent of their power, or the nature of their instructions, they made a preliminary demand that the further march of the troops must be arrested, and that I must not march beyond the position I then occupied. This proposition was peremptorily declined; I announced my intention to advance; and the commissioners returned to their camp without imparting further the object of the proposed negotiations."

Stockton seems to have been impressed by the fear that a truce would have enabled the Californians to organize, and to exterminate the American settlers. Again the government of the United States was thwarted in its designs by a blundering officer.

On August 9, after the return of the disheartened commissioners to the Campo de la Mesa, Castro held a conference with his officers and determined to leave California. He wrote to the Governor to this effect: "After having done all in my power to prepare for the defense of the department, and to oppose the invasion of the United States forces—I am obliged to make known to you that it is not possible to accomplish either object, because, notwithstanding your efforts to afford me all the aid in your power, I can count on only 100 men, badly armed, worse supplied, and discontented by reason of the misery they suffer."

Upon the receipt of Gen. Castro's letter and accompanying documents, Pio Pico once more addressed the Assembly on the 10th of August. He admitted the hopelessness of their cause, and proposed the dissolution of the Assembly that the enemy might find none of the departmental officers in authority. The Governor issued his farewell address to the people. He stated that between "ignominy and emigration" he would choose the latter. The two chiefs did not go together. The Governor remained in retirement at the rancho of his brother-in-law, John Forster, near San Juan Capistrano for a month before leaving Alta California.

4. Coronel Docs. MS. No. 174.

After the return of the commissioners, Flores and De la Guerra, Consul Larkin was sent to Los Angeles. He reported the flight of the Comandante; Governor Stockton, with his marines, on August 11 began the march to Los Angeles. They encamped the first night at Temple's rancho, and made a juncture the following day with the forces of Frémont who had come from San Diego. With a full band of music, four quarter deck guns mounted on sorry looking horses, and the privates on foot, the Americans marched around the Plaza and established headquarters in adobe buildings on the south side where the St. Charles Hotel now stands. The Californians watched them from the oak-fringed hills, but later in the day, yielding to the potent spell of music, gathered about the Plaza to listen to a concert that was furnished by the band. This was the first conquest of Los Angeles by the Americans.

Frémont and Stockton left the pueblo September 2; the latter going to Monterey by sea; the former, with forty men, by land. Before leaving the officers had received by carrier from the warship "Warren" definite news of the declaration of war with Mexico with orders to occupy the sea-coast towns, and to send news of the local conditions by courier. Lieutenant Gillespie was appointed commander of the Southern Department to enforce the regulations made by his chief and to appoint such civil officers as were necessary.

The police regulations prescribed by Stockton were unwise and showed a regrettable ignorance of the proud people he presumed to govern. Gillespie was a fine officer and should not be held responsible for the resulting fiasco. In brief, he was to maintain martial law; enforce the observation of the proclamation of the 17th, and allow only those known to be friendly—upon a written permit—to be out before sunrise or after sunset, or to carry weapons.

Serbulo Verela, a Sonoran, in company with a score of his friends made an attack upon the adobe structure on the south side of the Plaza where Gillespie and his men were quartered. The assault was not a very serious matter in itself, but it was the torch that started the conflagration. Verela gathered a force of 300 men; Gen. Castro's veterans broke their parole and assumed command. Captain José Flores, who was a very able man, was made Comandante; Antonio Carrillo and Andreas Pico were assigned second in command.

Government by pronunciamiento had been the fashion on both sides for some months, but it remained for Verela to issue this notable one:

"Citizens:—

"For a month and a half, by a lamentable fatality resulting from the cowardice and incompetence of the Department's chief authorities, we see ourselves subjugated and oppressed by an insignificant force of adventurers from the U. S. of N. America, who, putting us in a worse condition than that of slaves, are dictating to us despotic and arbitrary laws; by which, loading us with contributions and onerous taxes, they wish to destroy our industries and agriculture, and compel us to abandon our property, to be taken and divided among themselves. And shall we be capable of permitting ourselves to be subjugated, and to accept in silence the heavy shame of slaves? Shall we lose the soil inherited from our fathers, which cost them so much blood? Shall we leave our families victims of the most barbarous servitude? Shall we wait to see our wives violated, our children beaten by the American whip, our property sacked, our temples profaned, to drag out a life of shame and disgrace? No! a thousand times no! compatriots!"

Verela's fears and fiery eloquence are not to be discounted in their effect upon the populace.

Commodore Stockton had anticipated a possible return of Castro with re-inforcements from Mexico, and had instructed a score of Americans to guard the San Bernardino frontier against this danger. On September 26-27, Flores sent Verela with fifty men to join forces with José del Carmen marching from the east, to rout the Americans at Chino. The Americans had assembled at an adobe ranch house. The Californians succeeded in getting under the walls of the house. Neither side had much ammunition. After a sharp demonstration the Americans surrendered and were taken prisoners to the camp of Gen. Flores just outside of Los Angeles.

The entire Californian forces now threatening Gillespie in Los Angeles, he retired for a stand on the hill to the west of the pueblo afterward known as Fort Hill or Ft. Moore. Gen. Flores called on the American lieutenant to surrender, pointing out that the situation was hopeless and that resistance would be an unnecessary loss of human life. He offered to allow the Americans to depart with their colors and all the honors of war. Flores also suggested an exchange of prisoners. These magnanimous terms the Americans finally accepted and marched to San Pedro, accompanied by a few American families. Gillespie had dispatched a courier, Juan "Flaco," (John Brown) to Stockton at San Francisco for re-inforcements. The courier rode the entire distance in six days! The Commodore received the message on September 30th, and dispatched Captain Mervine with three hundred men to join Gillespie. The troops arrived on the 6th of October.

Two days later, the boats were manned at six o'clock in the morning and the men marched toward Los Angeles. There are many versions of the battle which ensued. We have no official reports from either side. Lieut. Duval, an

officer with Capt. Mervine, wrote an account of the engagement in a letter to his family, which is in the possession of Dr. J. E. Cowles of this city; and Don Antonio Coronel, an aide-de-camp of Gen. Flores, has also given an account of it. The Americans marched all day through plains of dry, wild mustard grown six to eight feet high. The enemy retreated before them until sundown, when they formed on a hill nearby. The American Marines under Captain Marston, the Colt's Riflemen under Captain Carter, and the Volunteers under Gillespie charged the Californians, who, fortified by a small cannon strapped to a diminutive wagon on wheels, would fire, drag back the piece by their reatas, ride out of rifle-range, and reload. At six o'clock the next morning the two forces again met. The Californians were armed with lance and carbines, and with the little cannon pursued the tactics of the previous day. The Americans tried in vain to capture the gun that had killed four of their number and wounded six. Believing further effort useless, they returned to San Pedro to bury their dead on Dead Man's Island—and the Battle of Dominguez Rancho was history.

Had the Americans but known the sorry plight of their opponents the conquest would have been complete in a few hours, but the "Old Woman's gun," (so-called because it had been dug up from the garden of Inocencia Reyes, who had buried it on the first approach of Stockton to the pueblo), had multiplied itself too well.

During the remainder of the month, the Californians remained at Temple Rancho, "Los Cerritos," and at "Palos Verdes," the rancho of Sulpulevda, near San Pedro. Upon the arrival of Stockton at San Pedro, October 19, the same tactics of deception were used by the Californians. Larger droves of loose horses were driven in sight of the enemy. Several days were spent in skirmishes which the Californians designate as the Battle of the Mesa, but of which there are no official accounts by the American officers. Stockton, believing that the Californians had at least 800 calvarymen, decided to embark for San Diego, and effect a junction with the forces of General Kearny, who was expected to arrive over the Santa Fé trail.

In the meantime, Gen. Flores was attempting to direct affairs in Los Angeles. He commissioned Lieut. Antonio F. Coronel to proceed to the City of Mexico via Sonora for funds and supplies. The young officer carried the flag captured at San Pedro to convince the Mexican Government that the Californians were amply able to defend themselves if assisted at this critical period. On approaching

the Colorado crossing, however, he heard of Kearny's forces approaching from the east. Dispatching a courier, Felipe Castillo, to Sonora with his messages, Coronel retreated to Temecula, escaping capture through the friendly offices of an Indian.

After the disastrous engagement of Kearny's men with the cavalry of Andres Pico at San Pasqual, the Americans recuperated at San Diego. On the first of January, 1847, the combined forces of Com. Stockton and Gen. Kearny started for Los Angeles. The men were poorly clothed, the animals poor and weak, the roads rough and heavy, the weather cold, but according to official reports, "the men went through the whole march of one hundred and forty miles with alacrity and cheerfulness." They encamped at Los Flores, San Luis Rey, San Juan Capistrano, and at the Rancho Los Coyotes, which is adjacent to the present town of Norwalk. From Los Coyotes, the men came down through Los Nietos to "The Narrows," the pass between Potrero Heights on the one side and La Puente hills on the other,—the natural floodgate of the San Gabriel River. Here the Americans found the Californians awaiting them upon the bluff, armed with lances and supported by nine field pieces, the largest number of cannon which the Californians had during the entire trouble. The powder had been manufactured at the San Gabriel Mission, and was of the most inferior quality, either by accident, or by design, as was charged in some quarters, for the Spanish priests at the Mission were not in sympathy with the Mexicans.

This battleground has been located at various points by different historians,⁵ but the writer is confident from the testimony of Mr. Walter Temple and others, and more particularly by the mute witnesses that have been unearthed during 1914, that the battle was fought as described. On the ranch of Edward L. Lieber, grape shot and small cannon balls are not infrequently upturned by the plow; while the two copper and one brass cannon, which were unearthed by Mr. Poyorena and companions in 1914 in the Eaton Wash about a mile east of the Mission, show that the battle must have been fought not far from that vicinity.

After an engagement lasting about an hour and a half, the Californians retreated in good order; the greater number retiring to the Verdugo Rancho. The two American officers continued their triumphant march to Los Angeles. Four field pieces and the "Old Woman's Gun" were there

5. See Bancroft, *History of California*, Vol. V; Willard, *History of Los Angeles*, p. 225.

surrendered and the little city became American. It remained the seat of government, however, only a few months, when the archives were removed to Monterey.

By a singular co-incidence, it was Lieut. Frémont and not Commodore Stockton who signed the final terms of surrender and amnesty at Cahuenga that closed the operations in the south, and reconciled many Californians to the new régime. The pastoral period was closed, and a new period of progress and industrial expansion was inaugurated.