

The Gabilan Peak Campaign of 1846

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THE STORY of the Mexican Californians' reaction to Frémont's expedition has not been fully or clearly told as yet. A manuscript which throws some light on the bumbling, albeit patriotic, response to the Yankee "invasion" is the statement given Thomas Savage by Augustín Escobar, a *juez de campo* in Monterey in 1846¹ His story of the Gabilán² Peak crisis and the days following it add detail and color to the history of that period in California.

It will be recalled that March 3, 1846, saw John Charles Frémont and his half-a-hundred men camped some twenty-five miles from Monterey, near the Hartnell Ranch.³ On that day a Mexican cavalry officer, Lieutenant Chávez, rode up to the American bivouac and delivered a letter from General Castro. This message ordered the *gringos* to leave the Department of California immediately.⁴

Frémont refused to comply and next day moved to the high ridge between the Salinas and San Joaquín Rivers, camping on Gabilán Peak. This height dominated the Salinas plain and the San Joaquín Valley, allowing a retreat, should it be necessary, to the San Joaquín River.⁵

A rough log fort was built and, as the company cheered, the American flag was raised. Here Frémont remained for three days (March 7-10, 1846) with the Stars and Stripes waving over Mexican territory while Consul Larkin and various Californians sent him information about the activities down below.⁶

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Frémont wrote Larkin on March 9th, from the "*Pic del Gabelano*," stating that "I am making myself as strong as possible, and in the intention that if we are unjustly attacked we will fight to extremity and refuse quarter, trusting to our country to avenge us."⁷

Using a telescope, Frémont could observe the Mexican troops led by Castro as they gathered at Mission San Juan Bautista. *Vaqueros* informed him that Indian auxiliaries were being brought into Castro's camp where they were plied with liquor. In the afternoon he spied cavalry movements, including one by a body of forty horsemen which moved up the road toward Gabilán Peak. He placed forty men in ambush in a thicket but the Mexicans halted, consulted for a time amongst themselves, and turned back.⁸

Writing Mrs. Frémont on April 1st, he said: "The Spaniards were somewhat rude and un hospitable below, and ordered us out of the country, after having given us permission to winter there. My sense of duty did not permit me to fight them, but we retired slowly and growlingly before a force of four hundred men and three pieces of artillery."⁹

Frémont was apparently afraid to compromise the United States and therefore refrained from committing any hostile action, retiring instead from his position on the peak.¹⁰

Thomas Larkin, however, wrote to the United States Consul at Mazatlán (March 9, 1846), asking him for a sloop of war since he feared that much blood would be shed at Gabilán Peak, because Frémont had only fifty men and from three to six guns, rifles and pistols each" against a force of nearly 300 Californians.¹¹

General Castro sent John Gilroy, a long-time resident of the region, to make offers to Frémont on March 11. When Gilroy arrived at Frémont's position, he found the campground deserted, campfires still burning, and abandoned tent poles, clothing, saddles and a flagstaff marking the site. With the vanishing of Frémont, Castro's party demobilized and went home during the period March 11-13.¹²

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Bancroft, noting the disinclination of Castro to attack Frémont at Gabilán Peak, still believed that "of the two, Frémont made by far the greater fool of himself." The Escobar manuscript, which follows, will indicate that Castro's campaign was something on the order of an *opéra bouffe* itself.

Don Estéban de la Torre introduced Escobar to Thomas Savage, one of H. H. Bancroft's scribes, in order that the latter might obtain information on the campaign against Frémont, conducted by Colonel and ex-governor Alvarado, which might be useful to the Bancroft Library. On May 9, 1877, Escobar related the story to Savage as follows, titling it "*La Campaña de '46 Contra Los Americanos en California.*" (The manuscript, in Spanish, is in the Bancroft Library, University of California.)

"In 1846 I came from the southern ranch where I had been hunting in the Sierras and brought with me some otter skins when, suddenly, there appeared in the middle of the road a man who came up to me speaking a foreign language which I did not understand, and this I stated in my own tongue. He was blocking me off from the road with his horse but as he did not make use of his arms, I did not use mine either, but was trying to open the way in order to continue my trip.

"After various attempts to pass, I reached for my rifle and then he, without taking up his own weapon, gave a shout and I saw myself surrounded immediately by six or eight men armed with rifles. One of them who spoke Spanish asked if I did not know that the United States was at war with Mexico. I answered that I did not know it because I had just arrived from the mountains where I had been more than a month. This was when Frémont was moving about in the vicinity of Gabilán Hill.

"The result of all this was that they made me deliver up my horse, saddle and rifle but did not take the pelts away from me. As best I could, I made my way to the town of Monterey.

"About a month later, or somewhat less, Don Juan Bta. Alva-

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rado summoned me and asked if I would like to take up arms, since it appeared that the Americans wished to seize the country and it was necessary to defend it as much as we might be able to do so. I answered him that I was ready to die in the defense of my country, together with my other compatriots. I left then with the force of Californians from here in Monterey, bound for San Juan Bautista to join Don José Castro who was there.

“We camped with Colonel Alvarado at Los Pilarcitos, against a fence, in the open without shelter.

“Our total force must have been some sixty or seventy men who were divided into encampments, one in charge of Alvarado, and the other, at some distance, in charge of the Perfect Don Manuel Castro. I belonged to the Alvarado squad. On setting up camp, a guard of four soldiers and one corporal was named and was placed at the orders of Don Estévan de la Torre, of the guard of honor.

“That night, around 9 o'clock, I was sentinel in the immediate area of the great bonfire lit because of the cold. At the other side was Señor Alvarado who had his bed laid out. He was reclining there, taking swallows of liquor until he became very drunk.

“At this juncture, Tiburcio, a soldier of my company, arrived. He was very drunk also and began to shout ‘*Vivas!*’ for Colonel Alvarado, repeating them with such frequency that Alvarado became angry and ordered him to retire, but Soto would not obey and there followed a long quarrel until the furious Alvarado gave me orders to shoot Soto, but the officer of the guard, Don Estévan de la Torre, signaled me not to shoot.

“I told Soto several times to move off, but he did not obey. Finally, Señor Alvarado, highly annoyed, ordered de la Torre to carry Soto off, form the guard, and there, to one side against the fence, to shoot him four times. La Torre obeyed, taking Soto away but it appears that he conformed only in dispatching Soto out of camp.

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“Some time later Alvarado asked me, ‘Aguias, where is Soto?’ I answered, ‘Well, didn’t you order that he be taken away?’ ‘Yes, all right,’ he replied, and turned over to go to sleep. I believed that de la Torre would do no more than tie up Soto and keep him until his drunkenness should pass, since I could not believe that he was capable of shooting Soto in obedience of an order given by a man who was out of his senses.

“Well, this can be believed since I, though being a sentinel, was called by Alvarado to take a drink and although I regretted it very much, on account of the great cold, I had to excuse myself. He insisted, however, and I did not need much urging. They [the drinks] kept pouring and I drank with much pleasure.

“On the following morning, as soon as we had breakfasted, we continued to San Juan where we joined Señor [José] Castro. In the afternoon of the following day an American presented himself in our camp to speak with Don José Castro. There they had a conversation but I did not find out what they discussed. During our stay there Señor Castro amused himself firing salvos at an alder tree with a *culverin*, knocking the tree to pieces. The artilleryman who directed the shots was Don Francisco Rico.

“We had understood that Captain Frémont, with his party, was intrenched in Gabilán Hill. We camped in the corridors of the *plaza* of the San Juan Mission. Don José Castro ordered Domingo Hernández and Capistrano López to go up and explore the ground occupied by Frémont. Upon their return they said that Frémont was there with his forces intrenched, and ready to fight.

“Suddenly, the notice came that Frémont and his people had disappeared from the hill. There was no attack upon Frémont despite the requests of many of us because Castro opposed it, alleging that there was no necessity for spilling blood, and that he did not want to take the responsibility for the California blood that would be spilled. All were anxious to fight and we became disgusted with Castro for having impeded us. Among us there was a company of excellent riflemen who would have shone in combat.

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“From this discontent there followed a revolution against [Don José] Castro and Alvarado, to put Francisco Rico and Manuel Castro in their places but it appears that the former got word of it and suddenly the commanding general dissolved our auxiliary companies. To carry out this act he had formed his Presidio of Monterey Company and another auxiliary from the ranches of Gilroy and San Isidro, and had located the cannon carefully, loaded with grapeshot, with the cannoneer ready and the fuse burning. He delivered a harangue to us and told us to march back to our homes, and this we did.”

(The remainder of the Escobar manuscript does not concern the Gabilán Peak episode but is an interesting commentary on the conditions in California in the days that followed, when partisan factions were active.)

“After this I maintained myself here in my house in Monterey and also at the Saucito ranch. On this ranch I found myself one day when already the United States flag was flying at Monterey. There Don Enrique Canbustón, Don Francisco Rico, Don Pedro Narváez, others of the country, and an American presented themselves. I invited them to dismount; they asked me if I could give them something to eat, and said that they would pay.

“I answered that I would give them everything I had without the necessity of their paying me. Seeing among them a fellow compatriot and friend, Don Pedro Narváez, I hurried more in serving them. The American was almost trampling on my wife with his horse when she told him to back up — she was making the meal outside the house — and he retired to one side.

“When the tea was ready and I was carrying the tea pot inside the house, just before entering, Canbustón, Narváez and Rico put pistols to my chest, and upon my asking them why they did this, they told me because I refused to aid those who fought for the Fatherland. I responded that I had always been quick to defend it against foreign enemies but never to combat my countrymen, that it pleased me more to attend to my business and my family, and not involve myself in uproars.

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“Finally, after threats from one or the other party, they tied my hands with a halter because a certain Francisco Pinto had ordered me to be silent and asked me if I didn’t know who Don Francisco was. I looked at the latter and said he was Pancho Rico. Then Pinto asked me if I did not know that Rico was an officer, to which I replied that I did not nor did it matter to me.

“After being tied, my wife and daughter began to weep but I ordered them to go away, telling them that death did not frighten me, because it must be observed that they had threatened to shoot me immediately. I told them to hand me my arms, which they had already seized, and afterwards they could deal with me. But, of course, they paid no attention to my protests and took not only my arms but a small box which contained about 2./2\$ [*sic*]

“The next day I came to Monterey and informed Judge Colton of what had happened — he made a note of the names of the individuals whom I mentioned — and wished to give me a force to pursue them but I answered that they had already gone and it would be useless. The priest also spoke with the judge — I don’t know what passed between them.

“Dr. Teodoro Gonzalez (still living in Monterey in 1877) called me to question me about what had happened with Pancho Rico, his stepson and adopted son, and I answered that I believed that it had all been a drunken carousal — in truth, I believed so. I advised him that I had notified the authorities. I remained embittered by the conduct of Rico, but Don Teodoro begged me not to say anything against his son, [assuring me] that he would pay for everything. Later he handed over to me all my arms and since then Rico and I have continued being friends.

“Later, I had Canbustón imprisoned and Don Pedro Narváez suffered good blows at the hands of my brother, José M^a Escobar. I considered that that had been punishment enough and I did not wish to order him before the judge.

“In the political questions which occurred in the country to overthrow the governor named by the Supreme Government of

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Mexico, I and my brothers always abstained from taking part, because we were born in California and our mother also, [while] our father was from Mexico and we did not believe it right to fight against our father and our common Fatherland. Thus we maintained ourselves free from compromises and attended to our business. We were not the only ones. There were many others who thought in the same way and never offered to take part in the political convulsions here — father always supported the constituted government.”

At the request of Augustín Escobar
May 9, 1877

Tho. Savage

SOURCES

1. Bancroft, H. H., *History of California* (San Francisco: The History Co. Publishers, 1886) V, p. 637.
2. The official spelling of the Spanish word for “sparrow hawk” which has been given to the peak and range by the U. S. Geographic Board is Gabilán rather than the customary Gavilán of modern Spanish usage.
3. Frémont, John Charles. *Memoirs of My Life* (Chicago and New York: Belford, Clark & Co., 1887) I, p. 458.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 459
5. *Loc. cit.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 460
7. *Ibid.*, p. 463
8. *Ibid.*, p. 460
9. *Ibid.*, p. 460-61.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 461.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 464.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 468.
13. Bancroft, *op. cit.*, p. 16.