

San Pasqual: California's Most Famous Battleground

BY DWIGHT L. CLARKE

When *Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West* was written, it was my intention to include an appendix dealing with San Pasqual itself as distinct from the battle fought there.¹ Exigencies of space forced the omission of such an appendix. This article contains the material that was omitted from that book.

More than once in writing General Kearny's biography, comment was made on the error that have repeatedly crept into most of the accounts of his career. The confusion about the site of the most tragic episode in his life seems an ironic postscript to that biography.

San Pasqual or San Pascual? Which is the correct spelling? The topographical sheets of the U.S. Geological Survey as well as the 1921 report of the California Historical Survey Commission, written by its Director, Owen C. Coy, use "q." So do the highway maps of today. On the other hand, James Truslow Adams' *Atlas of American History*,² and Arthur Woodward in his *Lances at San Pascual*,³ spell it with a "c." Contemporaries of the battle seem also to have differed as to the spelling. "Filings," believed to have been the pseudonym of Joseph T. Downey, a sailor on the *U.S.S. Portsmouth*, spelled it San Pascual.⁴ Lieutenant William H. Emory printed San Pasqual on his map contained in *Notes on a Military Reconnaissance*.⁵ The famous "Justice" letter, believed to have been written by Lieutenant Colonel Cooke, also used San Pasqual.⁶ Early historians were similarly divided. Bancroft wrote San Pascual;⁷ Soulé, Gihon and Nesbit's *Annals of San Francisco*,⁸ as well as Hittell,⁹ spelled it San Pasqual.

Mrs. Mary Rockwood Peet (long a resident of the valley) in her

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book, *San Pasqual—a Crack in the Hills*,¹⁰ says San Pascual was the early spelling, probably given by the Franciscans. (The local Indians called the valley Puk-ke-dudl.) The name, of course, is Spanish, and in Spanish *pascual* (not *pasqual*) means the Pass-over or Easter.

In the face of such divided opinion and conflicting sources, one should not be too dogmatic. Merely because the U.S. Geological Survey and the Commission Report¹¹ made by Director Coy come closest to an official ruling, and since the Highway Commission seems to have been governed by them, I adopted the San Pasqual spelling.

Even pronunciation of the name varies. Mrs. Peet is undoubtedly correct in saying the Spanish is “Sahn Pahs kwáhl,” accented on the last syllable.¹² This has become anglicized to “San Pas kwáll;” the final “a” as in wall.

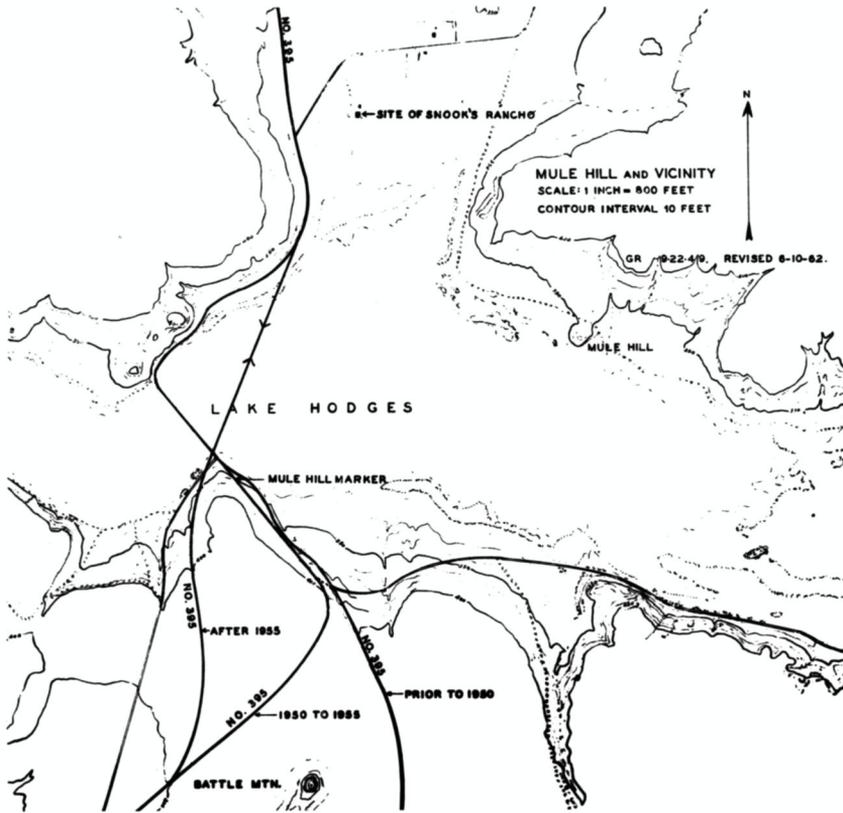
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One hundred and sixteen years have brought many changes to San Pasqual. It is no longer the wild, sequestered canyon known only to a few Indian inhabitants, but it is still a vale of beauty. The steep, rocky slopes that hem it in so closely on the north and south have not altered since Kearny’s time. Most of the valley floor, however, is now in green alfalfa fields and dairy farms.

These changes naturally affect the ready identification of the battleground. To the east, Highway 78 from Ramona comes down the steep grade of Clevenger Canyon. Southwest of that lies Little Clevenger Canyon. The Americans probably descended the western ridge of the latter. Below Little Clevenger in the southeast corner of the valley, the San Pasqual Academy was built about 1949. One of its instructors told me that a rough trail can still be traced through the heavy brush of the ridge above the Academy buildings. Old residents are sure the Americans came down on the valley floor quite near the present dairy barn of the Academy, which stands a little west of its other structures.

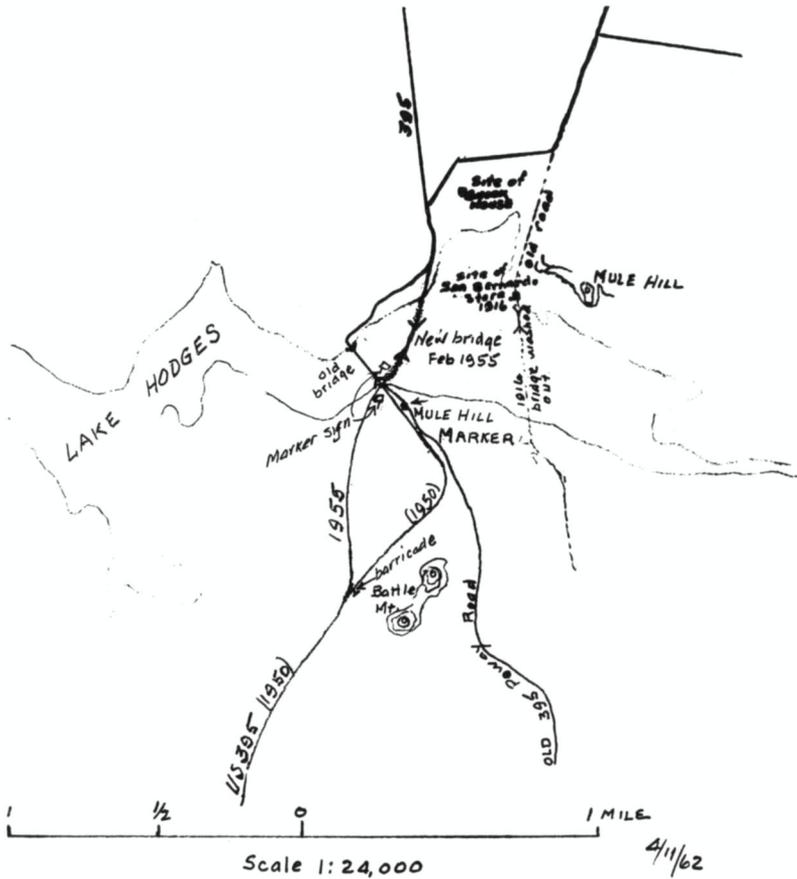
On the other hand, Colonel George Ruhlen, U.S.A. (Retired), of San Diego (formerly president of the San Diego Historical Society) informed me that Arthur Woodward traced the route some years ago. (Woodward in his youth lived near Ramona and was

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Survey of Mule Hill and vicinity in June, 1962.
By Colonel George Ruhlen, U.S.A. (Ret.)

very familiar with the region.) Woodward later marked Kearny's route on a U.S. Geological Survey map for Colonel Ruhlen. The latter traveled over a portion of the trail himself and checked Woodward's findings against several old maps. On the basis of these facts, Colonel Ruhlen was satisfied with Woodward's conclusion that the Americans reached the valley floor more than two miles further west than the dairy barn. That structure is almost directly south across the valley from the cemetery knoll northeast of the long concrete bridge over Santa Ysabel Creek. According to Mrs. Peet, who lived close to this bridge for many years, the first charge in which Johnston was killed was in its immediate vicinity. According to this reasoning, the Indian vil-



Sketch of Mule Hill area showing present roads and bridges in relation to former structures. By Colonel George Ruhlen, U.S.A. (Ret.)

lage where Pico's men were sheltered lay close to the large barns and small grocery store that now stand just west of this knoll at the north end of the bridge.

Emory's "Sketch of the Actions fought at San Pasqual," contained in his *Notes*, is fairly consistent with this theory. It locates the village on the *north* side of the Rio San Bernardo, somewhat east of Kearny's camp on the night of December 6th.

According to what can be called the Ruhlen-Woodward theory, the village stood on a knoll or tongue of land on the *south* side of the valley near the foot of the trail by which the Americans descended. Owen C. Coy's 1921 report says, "This village is located

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near a small detached hill or knoll standing near the head of the valley?" Colonel Ruhlen says that the knoll or tongue of land and the village were washed away by heavy floods some years after the battle. When one recalls the variable nature of the rivers in Southern California, it seems entirely possible that a site that was on the north side of a stream in 1846 could be south of it today. A sketch map made by Colonel Ruhlen shows the village site slightly southeast of the Battle Monument and considerably nearer to it than is the concrete bridge. Cavalry battles, especially where irregulars like Pico's lancers were engaged, inevitably extend over a considerable area. Captain Moore's charge and Pico's countercharge must have covered most of the floor of the valley between the bridge and the present battle monument. The monument grounds are the site of the American camp on the night of December 6, and the next day's line of march roughly followed Highway 78 for some distance.

The site of Snook's ranch house is also unmistakable. It lay to the east of Highway 395 and to the south of an unnumbered side road which diverges from it to go eastward into San Pasqual valley.

When one seeks to identify Mule Hill, care should be exercised to avoid confusion. It lies about a half mile southeast of Snook's ranch house. Here a low rocky eminence juts out toward the shore of Lake Hodges. Some years ago the San Dieguito was dammed a little over three miles west of Mule Hill. This was to create the reservoir known as Lake Hodges. The east end of the lake has been dry for several years; the bed is heavily grown to weeds and used for pasturing cattle.

On Highway 395 just south of the straight and shorter bridge now in use across Lake Hodges, an arrow marked "Mule Hill" points directly towards the hill I have described. A few hundred feet south of this arrow on the highway stands a sign calling attention to "an historical monument" on the *old* roadway of 395. This road turns southeasterly at a sharp angle from the present highway and ascends the north base of Battle Mountain. Four or five hundred feet southeastward on the old roadway stands a large stone monument with a bronze plaque inscribed "Mule Hill." It is State Registered Landmarks No. 452. The marker was placed by the California Centennial Commission and base furnished by

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the San Diego County Historical Markers Committee, dedicated September 3, 1950. The whole story of the events on Mule Hill is related on the plaque. A steel post alongside Monument 452 with a metal arrow pointing to Mule Hill bears the following inscription, "The boulder studded hill $\frac{3}{4}$ mile northeast of this spot where the white marker shows is Mule Hill."

Not long ago a lecturer on history told a large group of visitors that *he* did not know where to find Mule Hill and believed that its location was uncertain. So much confusion about it has developed that some travelers leave the spot with the wholly wrong impression that Battle Mountain is the site where Kearny and his dragoons held off the *Californios*. Battle Mountain (even its name aids the deception) is a much higher and steeper eminence than Mule Hill. Actually it takes its name from a fight between two Indian tribes prior to the Mexican War period.

If, when standing beside Monument 452, one will look across the lake bottom in a northeasterly direction, he will see some white rocks near the top of a low hill. These have been painted white as a guide to the historically curious. They are a part of the outer wall of the breastworks built by Kearny's men. Since Mule Hill is quite a distance from any road, Colonel Ruhlen tells me that the large monument (452) was placed where it and the explanatory arrow could be easily seen from the highway.

Those who wish to visit the actual spot must approach it from the north through the fields east of the Snook ranch.¹³ When I visited it in September, 1957, I found a small bronze marker among the rocks at the summit of the hill. It read:

Mule Hill

Companies C & K 1st. United States Dragoons under Brig. Gen. S. W. Kearny were besieged in this position December 7-10, 1846 by General Andres Pico and his Californians, following the Battle of San Pascual.

E. Clampus Vitus

Platrix Chapter No. 2

Dedicated on October 31, 1954

Unfortunately vandals have since stolen this plaque!

Another source of confusion about Mule Hill appeared in Coy's 1921 report. In it he referred to a "serious defect" in Emory's Map.

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Coy made the point that Emory indicated the San Bernardo River runs to the east of the site of this battle, "when in reality it runs to the north of the peak . . ." (Incidentally, no one would call the real Mule Hill a peak although Battle Mountain is one.)

I believe Colonel Ruhlen offers the correct explanation. He and his son (of the same name and now a Major General, U.S.A.) have checked a number of Lieutenant Emory's locations in Arizona and New Mexico and found a uniform error in longitude of seven and a half minutes. Emory was a painstaking engineer and made reliable maps of the country the expedition traversed. In an article by Colonel Ruhlen published in the *New Mexico Historical Review*, he reminds us that in crossing the Alleghenies to join the Army of the West at Fort Leavenworth, Emory's stage was overturned.¹⁴ His sextants and chronometers were thrown to the ground and this affected the rates of the chronometers. Moreover, after the expedition abandoned its wagons for packsaddles on October 14, below Socorro, New Mexico, the instruments were inevitably subjected to further rough usage.

When Emory had completed the reconnaissance reported in his famous *Notes*, he adopted the longitude of San Diego (Old Town) as determined by Admiral Belcher of the British Navy in 1839.¹⁵ Emory checked back on Belcher's observations and made corrections. Belcher's longitude was only 07.2 degrees different from that determined by U.S. Engineers in 1940. Emory's longitude of Mule Hill is almost the same as indicated on up-to-date U.S. Geological Survey maps.

Referring to what he terms Emory's "serious defect," Coy ascribes it to Emory's failure to recognize the dry bed of the San Bernardo when the soldiers crossed it. Moreover, they were harassed by the better mounted Californians in this region, which also militated against careful note taking. Even so, I agree with Colonel Ruhlen that Kearny's command, containing experienced engineers and educated army officers as well as *mountain men*, would not cross a river-bottom, even if dry, without knowing it.

I agree with Colonel Ruhlen that Coy was confused by the name "Battle Mountain." Emory's map definitely shows Mule Hill on the north side of the San Bernardo. Yet, Coy in his report traces the routes of both Kearny and Pico upon a topographical map of the region and circles Battle Mountain as the site of the engage-

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ments from December 7-11.¹⁶ Coy also states, "It seemed safe to assume that the third engagement which was fought on the south side of the valley, took place upon the peak now known as Battle Mountain." He repeats this assumption twice.¹⁷

Those who want to know more about Mule Hill's location should refer to Arthur Woodward's photograph in his book, *Lances at San Pascual*.¹⁸ There is also a present-day photograph of the hill in my biography of General Kearny.¹⁹

California possesses few historic locations so pregnant with meaning.

NOTES

¹Published by the University of Oklahoma Press (Norman, 1961). The subject is covered in Chapter XV, pp. 195-232.

²(New York, 1943), p. 116.

³(San Francisco, 1948); reprinted from the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XXV (December, 1946), 289-308; XXVI (March, 1947), 21-62.

⁴See Fred B. Rogers, ed., *Filings from an Old Saw: Reminiscences of California's Conquest by "Filings"*; Joseph T. Downey (San Francisco, 1956), pp. 84-86.

⁵*U.S. Senate*, Exec. Doc., No. 7, 30th Cong., 1st Sess.

⁶Letter dated San Diego, Upper California, February, 1847, signed "Justice" and published in the *Missouri Republican*, June 14, 1847.

⁷Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of California* (7 vols.; San Francisco, 1884-1890), V, 343. John W. Caughey, the distinguished contemporary historian of California, accepts this same spelling. See his *California* (2nd ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1953), p. 236.

⁸Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon and James Nesbit, *The Annals of San Francisco . . .* (San Francisco, 1855), pp. 113, 116.

⁹Theodore H. Hittell, *History of California* (4 vols.; San Francisco, 1885-1897), II, 614.

¹⁰(Culver City, Calif., 1949), p. 15.

¹¹Owen C. Coy, *The Battle of San Pasqual* (Sacramento, 1921).

¹²Peet, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹³Permission should be obtained as a gate must be unlocked. Mule Hill itself is not visible from the point of the road where one enters the fields.

¹⁴"Kearny's Route from the Rio Grande to the Gila River," *New Mexico Historical Quarterly*, XXXII (July, 1957), 213-230.

¹⁵Sir Edward Belcher, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World . . . 1836-1842 . . .* (2 vols.; London, 1843), I, 323-333.

¹⁶Coy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16.

¹⁸Opposite, p. 43. Also see his *footnote* 114, p. 83.

¹⁹Facing, p. 240.