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JOHN BIDWELL: A PRINCE AMONG PIONEERS

BY ROCKWELL D. HUNT, PH. D.

Here was a Roman, indeed, from whose life the immortal Cicero, were he again writing on old age, might have gleaned many a suggestion, might have drawn deep inspiration. In his death we witnessed the passing of a prince among pioneers.

John Bidwell was born in Chautauqua County, New York, August 5, 1819, and died April 4, 1900. His ancestors for some generations had been New England farmers of sturdy stock. At the age of ten his parents, Abraham and Clarissa Griggs Bidwell, removed to Ashtabula County, Ohio, and in 1834 to the western part of that state. Returning two years later to Ashtabula, John entered the Kingsville Academy, which proved to be the last school he ever attended. Young Bidwell enjoyed comparatively meager opportunities for acquiring an education, but he very early displayed a spirit of earnestness and application in his studies, formed the life habit of turning circumstance and experience into educative forces, and throughout his eventful life he always evinced the liveliest interest in educational matters. He recalled the first school he ever attended, how he trudged along the pathway with snow on either side as high as his head, and how the schoolmaster, a Mr. Poor, went out to cut a piece of clear ice into a lens to illustrate the concentration of light rays.

Despite numerous disadvantages it is clear that he received an education far in advance of the average frontiersman. Besides all the common branches he attempted Latin, reading as far as the "Aeneid" of Virgil. He was accounted very good in arithmetic and grammar. Lack of funds compelled him to discontinue his studies. The opportunity arising in 1838, he engaged in teaching near his father's home: his examination as teacher was so eminently successful that it was subject for approving comment throughout that vicinity.

In his twentieth year, early in 1839, John Bidwell reached an important decision. He had strong aspirations for a college education, but he also had intense longings for travel—and seventy-five dollars cash in his pocket. He therefore decided that he would see something of the great Western prairies, and then return to enter college. That decision cost the young man a college education; but it proved the commencement of a career almost unprecedented in character—romantic, thrilling, unique. It made John Bidwell a pathfinder. How he delighted to live over again the alluring past! For hours at a time would he entertain and instruct in his deliberate,

inimitable way, with some segment from the large circle of his experience, those who came to enjoy his matchless hospitality at lovely Rancho Chico, Butte County, California. For one of my generation to hear him dwell upon the old California régime was veritably like listening to a voice out of the past: other days were given a voice, history became audible.

For nearly three-score years was John Bidwell a resident of California. Long before the "Days of Gold," even before Frémont's first expedition to the coast, Bidwell, with about thirty others, after a thrillingly interesting trip fraught with perilous incidents and hazardous escapes, reached California November 4, 1841, the first white immigrants known to cross the heart of the Sierra Nevada. The original Bartleson party numbered sixty-nine persons all told, of whom M. O. Nye of Oregon and John Bidwell of California were the latest survivors.

General Bidwell witnessed much belonging to each of the great stages in California development. He stood unique as the living embodiment of the several distinct régimes, or "ages," of our great Pacific Commonwealth, having rendered distinguished service in each régime.

Once in California he almost immediately became prominent, especially in the employ of Captain Sutter; as an adopted son of Mexico he early acquired such facility in the Spanish language as to do much official translating; he surveyed many extensive land grants, and was conspicuous in the Micheltorena war of 1845. He it was that drew up the concise document which Lieutenant Gillespie accepted as the fundamental law of the Bear Flag Republic; in the war of the American Conquest he received from Commodore Stockton the commission of quartermaster, with the rank of major; he was elected a member of the first Constitutional Convention, but being detained at the mines, was unable to serve.

John Bidwell as a Pioneer represented the best elements of a select body of men today virtually without a living representative. The passing of an honored '49er has come to inspire reverence and pathos; the ranks of the Pioneers of the Golden West, bound by cords of affection as genuine as earth can know, are being decimated yearly,—the inroads, made by Death, are ever deeper and wider. But yonder at Chico stood, after eighty rounded years of fruitful life and endeavor, our distinguished fellow-citizen, bridging the years with his memory; and out of the abundance of his own observation and experience he instructed the '49er in the romance, the picturesqueness of *early* California.

While manifesting deep interest in contemporaneous affairs and rejoicing at the tokens of our national and local advancement and development, ever deeply solicitous for the common weal, it is not strange that the mind of Bidwell should have loved best to dwell upon

the stirring theme of early days. With fine accuracy and wonderful comprehensiveness did he recount the details of a now-long-past activity in state building. He recalled the names not only of the earliest Americans in California, but also of the chief Spanish families, from San Diego to Sonoma. As an illustration of the retentive power of his mind he could, at the age of eighty, readily name about one hundred (nearly all) of the leading foreigners who had found their way into California before his entrance, together with their respective locations, based upon modern county divisions. He could name and locate with great exactness every county in our state. Who can fathom the satisfaction of such an old age? In one of Bidwell's last speeches, made on the occasion of the San José Golden Jubilee, he said, "I never found time to loaf. . . . I suppose it is natural for everybody to grow old in time, but we need not let our minds grow old." But now he is dead: he died at his work—but doubtless in the fullness of time. His mind was never permitted to reach senility.

General Bidwell was the recognized "Father of Chico," and his fellow-townsmen were ever proud to do him honor: upon the announcement of his death all the flags of bereaved Chico were set at half-mast and business houses were draped in mourning. His rancho included the town site, and the survey was made under his immediate direction.

Here must be mentioned his proverbial generosity and unbounded public spirit. One morning I learned that Bidwell had given the delightful Plaza to the town of Chico. At the dinner table I remarked my discovery that the General had not received a very large price for the square known as the plaza. "Oh," said he, "I never charged for anything that the public wanted—so far as I know." It was his intention to give to each church a building site of one-quarter of a block, and he did give sites to at least four denominations, aggregating in value many thousands of dollars. Among his numerous benefactions must be mentioned those of eight acres of valuable land, beautifully located, donated in 1887 as a site for the now well-known Normal School of Northern California, and an extensive tract of choice land for a United States Forestry Station. Since his death his public spirit and generosity have been continued by his widow, Mrs. Annie E. K. Bidwell.

Bidwell's noble estate, the Rancho Chico, was considered one of the most valuable properties in California. It was at one time worth perhaps \$2,000,000, but it did not escape the general shrinkage of land values of the '90s. Extending from the Sacramento River on the western boundary eastward fifteen miles, it contained some 23,000 acres, and was devoted to the raising of grain, vegetables, fruit and all kinds of livestock. Here, delightfully situated on the Arroyo del Chico, is the spacious Bidwell mansion with its broad

verandas, surrounded by such lovely grounds as few can boast even in favored California. This was, these many years, the home of General and Mrs. Bidwell. Here many thousands of persons of high estate and low have gratefully enjoyed the unbounded hospitality of the Bidwell's. Hither have come illustrious visitors, including President and Mrs. Hayes, General Sherman, Senator Stanford, and eminent scientists like Dr. Asa Gray, Sir Joseph Hooker and Professor Parry. No less welcome than these have been others of low estate, even the protegés from the Chico rancheria.

Within the mansion Mrs. Annie Bidwell, the vivacious, charming companion of the General, presided with admirable grace, gentleness and refinement. Mrs. Bidwell is the daughter of Hon. Joseph C. G. Kennedy, formerly a most prominent citizen of Washington, D. C., and a high authority on many subjects. She had moved in the highest circles of society in the National Capital, but did not deem even the degraded Chico Indians beneath her notice. For more than thirty years she was their faithful and efficient pastor and teacher. The truly marvelous transformation in their individual and collective life as the result of her ministry is an object lesson that cannot fail to be deeply impressive to every serious visitor at the rancheria.

Mrs. Bidwell has been called, and rightly so, "one of the noble women of the age." Deeply religious in character, the work that has been nearest her heart, second perhaps to her missionary labors for the Indians, is in the great cause of temperance. As an honored member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, her zeal has been unremitting and her good works have made her name familiar throughout the country. With half an eye the guest at the home could discover the great depth of affection and esteem in which husband and wife held each other. On one occasion I ventured to remark to the General upon the charming qualities of his wife: with evident satisfaction and pleasure he responded quickly and generously, "Professor, I have the very best wife in the world,—but one; and that is your own." In public life and private Mrs. Bidwell has been the indispensable help-meet to her husband.

There was never a time when Bidwell considered himself wealthy. He had no passion for being rich. Had acquisitiveness been his ruling passion he could have accumulated millions. Up to 1867 he incurred no financial obligations; but on going to Washington as a member of Congress he left his business affairs in the hands of other men, and through a combination of unfortunate expenditures and losses his debts began.

The "hard times" of the '90s came upon him in an evil hour and found him laboring under heavy financial obligations. Perhaps he was generous to a fault: within a short time he spent upwards of \$50,000 in making and improving mountain roads. Besides his large benefactions to the public, he has helped scores of individuals, all

gratuitously, but to his own financial detriment. As there were so many worthy causes appealing to him in later years and so many individual requests for assistance, it was a grief to the aged General that he could not open his hands as lavishly as in the days that had gone by.

If Mr. Bidwell did not acquire great wealth, he acquired what was vastly better than wealth. As the eventful years passed over his head, each dropped into his mind an invisible resource and into his heart a mellowing richness, which combined with large native endowment in the perfection of a character at once lofty, heroic, gentle, noble. He was a great lover of nature. The petals of the tiniest flower and the huge geological formations alike attracted his attention and admiration. He mastered the scientific nomenclature of the very numerous and interesting flora of his ranch, if not of the entire region, and was quick to notice any new plant, which, more than likely, he would preserve for a botanist.

As General and Mrs. Bidwell set out upon one of their regular mountain trips,—“Now, Annie, we must see how many plants we can name today,” he would say; and if the season at all favored, he would have named botanically some four-score before nightfall. Mrs. Bidwell, though possessed of quick mind and retentive memory, confessed her husband’s superiority in this recreation, as also in the ready quotation of apt verses. This venerable man had stored his mind with a wealth of poetry, particularly the classic poetry of nature, that seemed fairly astonishing to one who knew something of the business cares and manifold responsibilities that weighed upon him. How beautiful to find here and there a man who does not live by bread alone! Younger persons in the presence of this great soul were inspired to reach out for broader living.

The beautiful in art and nature appealed strongly to him: but he was also at eighty a docile student of science. Himself a good surveyor and an enthusiastic lover of engineering, he betrayed marked susceptibility to the fascinations of astronomy and geology. The only book he brought with him across the plains in ’41—no wonder he prized it so highly!—is Burritt’s “Geography of the Heavens,” published in 1839. He delighted in the discussion of new scientific theories, always alert to add to his intellectual stock, for the pleasures of the intellect were to him an indispensable element of life.

Bidwell was a member of the Presbyterian Church of Chico since 1868, having been converted in Washington and there joining the Methodist Episcopal Church on probation. He never was a stickler for dogma or creed; but stood upon the broad platform of Protestant Christianity. As a Christian he was large-hearted and broad-minded, modest, unassuming, humble, benevolent, charitable, broadly humanitarian. For nearly twenty years he taught a young men’s Bible class in Sunday School, giving much attention to the work, always

committing carefully to memory the entire lesson for the day.

He believed profoundly in the ruling of an all-wise Providence in the affairs of men, and recognized the hand of a merciful Father in his own life, as in the life of his beloved country. That the fabulous wealth of Californian gold should be kept from the world's view until the territory had become an integral part of our national domain and then that it should be poured forth so lavishly to the strengthening and preservation of our national credit during the dark days of the rebellion he deemed clearly providential. Shortly before his death, writing me of his experience in a frightful runaway, from which he escaped without a broken bone, he declared: "The wonder is that all my bones were not broken. Only a merciful dispensation of Providence saved me." His was a simple, sincere faith, with no suggestion of cant, deeply inwrought in his life, a most real part of himself.

One who had seen Rancho Chico would very naturally expect its owner to be deeply absorbed in agricultural pursuits: and indeed there can be no doubt that California is greatly indebted for its marvelous advances in agriculture to John Bidwell. Not only was he diligent in securing the best of farm products on his estate, but with true public spirit he was constant in his endeavor to develop the agricultural interests of the Commonwealth. For many years he was the chief patron of our State Agricultural Fairs. His very extensive exhibits were always promptly in place, and many are the premiums his products have taken. For a long time with characteristic generosity he made it a practice never to accept medals and premiums; later he accepted them for his wife, who now has a splendid collection of gold and silver medals taken by Bidwell grain, cattle, fruits, flour, etc. One beautiful medal I remember to have seen was taken at the Paris International Exposition in 1878 for the best wheat in the world.

When it became apparent to him that the principal feature of these fairs was nothing other than betting on horse-races with concomitant evils, Bidwell's high sense of morality would not permit him longer to countenance them; hence he withdrew his moral support and discontinued his extensive exhibits. Previous to 1875 he had been frequently honored in being asked to deliver the annual address before the State Agricultural Society.

But General Bidwell was not wholly wrapped up in agricultural pursuits: he was also a politician, and as such he saw much of public life. If ultimate right were always determined by a majority of human votes, then one might almost say that Bidwell was not a successful politician. The disappointment that came to him through the machinations of his opponents, and the abuse that was heaped upon him because of his unswerving allegiance to strict moral principles would make of a smaller nature a thorough pessimist. Yet

he never lost faith in humanity nor in the final triumph of right: serene and sweet in old age, his was the life of victory until death—victory and self-conquest.

His political career was long and full of interest, as the briefest resumé will show. After rendering conspicuous public service under the Mexican and the earliest American régime in California, he was in 1849 elected a member of the First Constitutional Convention, though he did not serve, and the same year chosen State Senator in the first California Legislature, where he served one year. Refusing to vote for Frémont in 1856, he went as a delegate from California to the famous Charleston convention of 1860. Of all the Pacific Coast delegates, he alone stood loyal to the Union in that hour of crisis,—“the black sheep of the flock,” as he facetiously remarked. In 1863 he received from Governor Stanford the appointment to command the Fifth Brigade, California Militia, which command he held to the end of the war. In 1864 he served as a delegate in the National Republican Convention at Baltimore, which renominated Lincoln; and at its conclusion he served on the committee of one member from each State to inform the President of his renomination. On that occasion, he afterwards affirmed, Lincoln, usually careworn in appearance, looked like a veritable chief.

In the same year Bidwell was returned to Congress by the Republicans of his district. In Congress his principal services were rendered as chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture. In 1867 he declined a renomination to Congress, the people of California desiring his nomination for Governor; but rejecting the overtures of the railroad company, his nomination on the Republican ticket was defeated. In 1875 he was nominated for Governor by the Non-Partisan and Anti-Monopoly party, but meeting with the violent opposition of the railroad forces he was defeated, with the result that the Democrats elected Governor Irwin. For many years Bidwell was very pronounced in his views against monopolies: he was even more widely known because of his radical views on the temperance question. He had always opposed the use of alcoholic beverages and was known as a teetotler even in the “early days.”

Since 1876 he was a prominent Prohibitionist. Strangely enough it was a clergyman who had persuaded Mr. Bidwell to make wine, about 1863, urging a pure article that might be generally adopted as communion wine. On his return from Washington, having noticed the deception practiced by his wine-maker and perceiving a tendency antagonistic to his temperance principles, he promptly decided to stop the whole business and purposed breaking in the heads of the barrels with an ax. In 1867 he uprooted all his wine-bearing vines, planting raisin and other choice varieties. This act was used as a club to prevent his nomination for Governor that year. George C. Gorham, who secured the nomination, said in his perora-

tion, "Let the grape-vine stand!" Doubtless Bidwell's fearless utterances on the temperance question in the exciting campaign of 1875 had much to do with his defeat, since they were displeasing to many of his own party and, as they protested,—wholly gratuitous.

In 1890 he was the Prohibitionist nominee for Governor of California. Two years later, much against his personal wish, he was nominated in the National Prohibition Convention in Cincinnati for President of the United States. He made a dignified campaign, though in poor health, receiving the largest vote that had ever been polled for that party.

He professed himself to have been an "incorrigible" Democrat till the war of the Rebellion broke out; then for more than a decade an "incorrigible" Republican; later an avowed Prohibitionist. Through all he adhered to his temperance principles, and maintained his hatred for monopolies. The question of temperance he deemed at least as important as had been the slavery question. The initiative and the referendum will come, as he thought, then the question of prohibition can be voted on as a separate issue, the women doubtless participating. He believed proportional representation to be just, and looked for the adoption of its principle. He earnestly advocated the union of all reform forces, during recent years especially, upon a common platform.

Bidwell was pronounced in his opposition to the gold standard for the United States. The general shrinkage of land values he believed was due to the gold standard "crime." Bimetallism by international agreement was favored, but in default of suitable arrangement he held that we should adopt the double standard for our great country alone. On the tariff question his attitude underwent some change. For many years inclined in favor of protection, he latterly confessed inclinations toward free trade. He desired protection, but would not secure it by taxing the poor. He did not see that the advantages of the tariff are certainly to endure indefinitely. Retaliation will be practiced by other nations toward us: "If we tax other nations they will tax us: they are bound to do it." Taxes should fall exactly where the ability exists to pay. A uniform income tax, after exempting, say \$600, is both just and equitable.

As to questions of war, while General Bidwell had seen much active service both in the ranks and in command, he did not possess a bellicose nature. He knew well the perils of the battlefield and the hardships of prison life, and recognized that war is an abnormal state. In the excitement of our strife at arms—the Spanish-American War—he expressed himself as desiring the war to cease before our people should forget and lose their taste for the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, manufacture and commerce. The destiny of our great Republic lies with Jehovah, the Omnipotent. Let us hail with delight the tokens of universal peace; but be not impatient be-

cause we may not in our generation see the grand consummation.

Even in his old age the bearing of John Bidwell was that of a soldier. His carriage was always dignified, his manner commanding. He possessed a remarkable physique. As a young man he stood full six feet in height, possessed a powerful frame and wonderful endurance. Yet he cared little for wrestling and kindred sports, and made no pretensions as a hunter.

In his declining years, while in a reminiscent mood, recalling the thrilling scenes of other days, his face became suffused with an intensity of emotion that seemed to give access to his very soul; while his flowing beard, only partly whitened with age, seemed to lend added authority to his deliberate speech and careful diction. Physical exercise became a necessity to his health. His chief forms of exercise were riding and, particularly, walking. But since walking on level ground merely for exercise was exceedingly monotonous and irksome to him, he was found much in the mountains at his favorite occupation,—the occupation in which he was engaged when the death stroke fell—namely, road building.

Here is an outcropping of his old instinct of leaving the smooth-trodden path for the unknown. At laying out and improving mountain roads he was an expert: to this pursuit he gave years of effort and a fortune of money: but the public has learned to appreciate his work for good roads; and the very pursuit, so healthful and congenial, without doubt extended the General's life. Years ago it had become the fixed practice—indeed they found it a necessity—for General and Mrs. Bidwell to enjoy each summer an extended outing in the high Sierras. Fortunate was the guest who was favored with an invitation to accompany them, for they were model campers.

John Bidwell was thoroughly approachable, though at times seemingly formal; as modest as Washington, though by no means lacking in personality; a serious, refined, Christian gentleman, though possessing a deep fund of quiet humor. Of him, all nature might stand up and say—HE WAS A MAN.