

"THE HISTORY OF THE CALIFORNIA BEAR FLAG"

By

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Since time immemorial it has been the custom of man to employ the use of banners and flags, not for the physical beauty that a piece of colorful cloth might have, nor to beautify the surrounding landscape but as an emblem or symbol representing the principles he professes and the ideals for which he strives. On an occasion such as this, I think it is altogether fitting and proper that we pause for a few moments to delve into the past and recall to our minds some of the events and circumstances surrounding the birth of our California State Bear Flag, for the Bear Flag, like our American Flag, sprang into being amidst the most sacred associations in our country's history.

In the early part of 1846, California was still a part of Mexico but it was seething with unrest. Jealousy between the Mexican Military Commander, Castro, and the Civil Governor Pico had flared into open hostility. Government had almost ceased to function. Justice was no longer administered and finances were depleted. Even the old California families of Spanish blood had decided that the Mexican misrule had made it impossible for them to remain any longer a part of Mexico but they were not united in a common course of action. Some thought they should attach themselves to France, while others were in favor of joining forces with England. There were a number who wanted to establish an independent territory and a few prominent leaders such as General Vallejo, commandant of the Northern Frontier with headquarters at Sonoma, were outspoken in advocating a junction with the United States of America. Off the coast of Monterey, the British Admiral Seymour and the American Commodore Sloat were eyeing each other suspiciously, waiting and watching to see which way the great cat of destiny was going to leap, and each ready at a moment's notice to send his forces into action should it jump in his direction.

It was in the midst of this taut political situation that, on the 14th day of June, 1846, a small band of resolute Americans rode into the town of Sonoma and informed General Vallejo that the "Independents", as they called themselves, were taking over the rule of California. This little group of 33 Americans, under the leadership of William B. Ide, then proceeded to take over the fort and haul down the Mexican flag from the staff in the plaza. They would have preferred, of course, to raise in its place the Stars and Strips but they had no authority to act on behalf of the government of the United States, so there on the spot, a new flag was designed.

It was a crude affair fashioned of the rough materials at hand but it represented the highest kind of ideals. A piece of unbleached muslin three feet by five feet was used with a piece of red flannel sewed across the lower edge. William L. Todd could find only pokeberry juice and lampblack for his colors but the star that he painted in the upper left hand corner was as bright a symbol of liberty as any that ever shone.

The crudely drawn figure of a grizzly bear was chosen to signify the unyielding determination of those men to establish the institutions of freedom and to live under them. Underneath, the words "California Republic" were then added, thus giving a name to the new commonwealth. By one of the strangest historical coincidences on record, the Bear Flag was first raised on the 69th anniversary of the birth of our American Flag, so that we, here in California, on our National Flag Day, June 14th, celebrate the birth of two great flags.

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Twenty-five days later on July 9, 1846, Lt. Joseph Revere arrived at Sonoma with the news that the United States was at war with Mexico, and with the enthusiastic approval of those who had raised it, hauled down the Bear Flag and raised in its place the Stars and Stripes, to which four years later on September 9th, 1850, a new star was added on the field of blue, the 31st which stood for California, the newest state in the Union. With the American Flag flying over Sonoma, the mission of the Bear Flag Party was accomplished. They had established the claim of the United States to that territory and all threat of seizure by some other power was ended, so the members of the Bear Flag Battalion enlisted as volunteers in the United States Army to serve under Colonel Fremont in completing the conquest of California.

Those who travel to Sonoma may see the great Bear Flag Monument which stands on the very spot where these historical events took place. It rests on a huge 40 ton pedestal of rough hewn granite. The inscription on the plaque reads: "This monument was erected by the Native Sons of the Golden West and the State of California, to commemorate the raising of the Bear Flag on this spot June 14, 1846, by the Bear Flag Party and their declaration of the freedom of California from Mexican rule. On July 9, 1846, the Bear Flag was hauled down and the American Flag here raised in its place by Lieutenant Joseph W. Revere, U.S.A., who was sent to Sonoma from San Francisco by Commander John B. Montgomery of the U.S. sloop of war 'Portsmouth' following the raising of the American Flag at Monterey July 7, 1846, by Commodore John Drake Sloat."

The Bear Flag is honored and preserved as an historic emblem of the heroic valor of those fighting pioneers and their vision to see that the destiny of their country was to span this entire continent from ocean to ocean and become the greatest, the richest, and the freest nation on the face of the earth under the same democratic institutions of freedom that they were fighting to establish.

That original Bear Flag was lost to posterity in the great San Francisco fire of 1906, but the memory of that emblem and the tradition that clusters around it will never be suffered to grow dim in the minds of the people of California as long as there is an Order of the Native Sons of the Golden West. By Act of the State Legislature, approved by Governor Hiram Johnson February 3, 1911, it was adopted as the official California State Flag and now flies with the American Flag over our public parks and buildings throughout the State of California.

It is a privilege for me, on behalf of Arrowhead Parlor No. 110, NSGW to present to this beautiful banner. As sons of California it holds a place in our hearts second only to the Stars and Stripes and I know that it is a fitting companion to that resplendant banner.