

Primary Source - Narrative of Mrs. Rosalia Vallejo de Leese (1874)

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ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW OF ROSALÍA VALLEJO BY HENRY CERRUTI

History of the Bear Party by Mrs. R. Leese

Narrative of Mrs. Rosalia Leese who witnessed the hoisting of the bear flag in Sonoma on the 14th of June 1846.

Q. Please madam Leese, tell me what you know with reference to the hoisting of the Bear Flag in Sonoma.

A. About half past five in the morning of June 14th 1846, an old gentleman called Don Pepe de la Rosa came to my house and notified me that a band of seventy two rough looking desperadoes, many of them runaway sailors from whale ships had surrounded the house of General Vallejo and had arrested him, Captain Salvador Vallejo and Victor Prudón. On hearing this alarming piece of intelligence, I dressed in a hurry and hastened to the streets for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of such report—the first thing which met my eyes was Colonel Prudón hastening to the rescue of Captain Salvador Vallejo, whom a ruffian called Benjamin Kelsey was trying to murder in cold blood. I don't believe that you can give a different name to the killing of an unarmed prisoner by a stalwart bully who had seventy men of his own ilk at his back. The timely arrival of Prudón saved the life of the defenseless Captain whom the companions of Kelsey hurried off towards the party under Doctor Semple to all appearance the least inhuman of that godforsaken crowd. I also perceived ex-Commander General Vallejo dressed in the uniform of a general of the Mexican army, a prisoner of a large group of rough looking men, some wearing on their heads caps made with the skins of coyotes or wolfs, some wearing slouched hats full of holes, some wearing straw hats as black as charcoal. The majority of this marauding band wore buck-skin pants, some blue pants that reached only to the knees, several had no shirts, shoes were only to be seen on the feet of fifteen or twenty among the whole lot.

After some parleying among themselves, a great many of them mounted their horses and escorted General Vallejo, Captain Salvador Vallejo, Colonel Victor Prudón and my husband Jacob Leese to Sacramento where they were delivered to the tender mercy of the arch fiend John A. Sutter, a man who though married in Europe where he had left a wife and several children, was living in open concubinage with two black women whom he had brought in his vessel from the Sandwich Islands.

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After General Vallejo had been hurried away, the remaining robbers hoisted in the square of Sonoma, on the flag staff that was standing in the corner of the plaza near the old mission church, a piece of linen about the size of a large towel, in it was painted a red bear and a lone star. It is fair to presume that John C. Frémont, the man who had planned the wholesale robbery of California, though an officer of the United States army, was afraid to compromise the honor of his government if his party pursued their thieving operations under the flag, that lovers of liberty throughout the world hold dear, hence his reason for resorting to the adoption of a flag unknown to civilized nations. As soon as the flag of the Bear had been hoisted, the robbers interpreter, Solís (formerly a servant of my husband) notified me that I was a prisoner, and he pointed towards four ill-looking desperadoes who stood near me with drawn pistols. Resistance being useless, I yielded and at their request gave them the key of the storehouse of my husband. No sooner I gave them the key, they called their friends and began ransacking the storehouse where were deposited provisions and liquor sufficient to feed two hundred men during two years. Few days after the departure of my husband, arrived in Sonoma John C. Frémont, who as he then said, came for the sole and only purpose of arranging matters so as to give general satisfaction, and protect every one against extortion or oppression. That man, whom many paid writers have dubbed with many an endearing epithet was a great coward. I say so with good reason—hear me—on the 20th of June, news reached Sonoma that Captain Padilla at the head of one hundred men was coming to the rescue of Sonoma, no sooner Fremont heard this than he sent for me and ordered me to address Padilla a letter requesting him to return to San José, and not to approach Sonoma. I flatly refused, but Frémont, who was bent on having his way, told me that he would burn our houses with us inside of them if I refused to address Padilla in the manner he wished me to do so, (“mandaré quemar las casas con ustedes adentro si Padilla se acerca a Sonoma”). I consented, not for the purpose of saving my life, but being then in the family way, I had no right to endanger the life of my unborn baby, moreover I judged that a man who had already gone so far would not stop at anything which may be a barrier to his ends, and being desirous of saving trouble to my countrywomen, I wrote the fatal letter which induced Captain Padilla to retrace his steps—while on the alert for Padilla, Frémont changed his shining uniform for a blue blouse, put away his hat and wrapped his head with a common

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handkerchief—he adopted this fantastic style of dress for the purpose of avoiding recognition. Is this the conduct becoming a brave man?

During the whole time Frémont and his gang were in Sonoma, robberies were very common. Ladies dared not go out for a walk unless escorted by their husband and brothers. Among my maid servants I had a young Indian girl about seventeen years of age; and I assure you that many a time John C. Frémont sent me orders to deliver her to the officers of the barracks, but by resorting to artifices I managed to save the unhappy girl from the fate decreed to her by the lawless band who had imprisoned my husband. During the whole time of my husband's imprisonment I forwarded him delicacies and gold, but the recreant Sutter, who on more than one occasion had been compelled to acknowledge the superiority of Mr. Leese, arranged matters so that during the two months of his imprisonment he never received a single dollar. He kept him during one whole week sleeping on the bare floor, and appointed as jailer of this room in which he was confined an uncouth Missourian who whenever he opened the door insulted the prisoners, whom a band of ungrateful horse thieves, trappers and runaway sailors had deprived of their liberty. I could relate many a misdeed of the Bear Flag crowd, but not wishing to detain you any longer I will close with the remark that those hated men inspired me with such a large dosis of hate against their race, that though twenty eight years have elapsed since that time, I have not yet forgotten the insults they heaped upon me, and not being desirous of coming in contact with them I have abstained from learning their language.

Monterey—June 27th 1874

Por Rosalía de Leese.

Rosana Leese.