

## THE CALIFORNIA GRIGSBYS AND THE BEAR FLAG REVOLT

by Olive Grigsby Bush

On June 14, 1846, thirty three armed and ragged men, including the first two Grigsby men into Napa Valley - Captain John Grigsby and his brother Franklin Temple Grigsby - rode into Sonoma, California. They captured General Vallejo, the Mexican authority of Northern California, seized the fort, and took command of Sonoma. They raised a newly made flag, and proclaimed the Sonoma fort area as the California Republic. Twenty four days later the area became part of the United States. These men and their descendents are known by genealogists as "Bears."

There are as many stories of the making of this new Bear Flag, as there are differences in the reports of the whole revolt. The flag story that we prefer is one which includes the family. This story claims that the red band at the bottom of the flag, under the bear, was originally the belly band of one of the Grigsby babies. (A belly band was intended to prevent a hernia forming in the umbilical cord area of a newborn baby.)

Many people have written of this event, and there are many reasons given for the revolt, but in order to understand why these people - who Warner describes as "poor souls who had nothing to lose" - suddenly took up arms, it is helpful if one is able to put oneself in their place in the climate that existed in California in 1846.

These were all patriots, farmers, and family men. They had risked everything on a tortuous journey into California. Theirs was the first wagon train to cross the Sierras, with 59 children and many cattle. For almost a year they had been scratching out an existence, and now they were threatened.

### The Situation in 1846:

1. Under Mexican rule a foreigner could only hold property by either marriage into a Mexican family, or by joining the Catholic Church. The Americans in southern California had done this and were therefore well integrated.
2. The few Americans in northern California, however, had done neither of these things, and were an isolated group, considered hostile by the Mexicans. Most of these people came from long lines of hardy peioneers who believed in the

divine right of the white American. Be it right or wrong, they were highly motivated by this belief.

3. President Polk, in his inaugural address, had put great emphasis on the annexation of California. The Mexicans knew this. Also, they were highly suspicious of Colonel Fremont who was in California with sixty armed men, supposedly on a mapping mission. He had been ordered out of the state by the Mexicans, but was only as far away as Oregon.

4. The Mexicans, with French and English backing, had sworn not to give an inch of land to Americans. They had already turned down an offer of \$40,000 for the area.

5. General Jose Castro, Military Commandant of California, had threatened to drive the Americans from northern California. It was known by the settlers that his troops had something to do with the murder of two of the group living north of San Francisco Bay.

6. Rumors were rampant in the area. Threats of murder, of great bodily harm, of financial ruin, of seizure of property with expulsion over the Sierra with no means of support, were just a few of them. These men, with all their earthly goods and their families, were desperate to know which way to turn.

7. Amidst this, Fremont, with men and horses, arrived back in the Marysville, California area (near Sacramento). He had been contacted by Lt. Archibald Gillespie, U.S. Marine Corps, who had been given secret orders by President Polk and sent into California. He was supposedly disguised, but it was so poorly done, that everyone knew of his presence and its purpose. The orders were memorized by Gillespie and never revealed. Knowing of Fremont's return and the presence of Lt. Gillespie, the settlers probably felt that the time to take California had arrived.

8. Fremont refused to go along with the Bears. He cautioned that the United States must not appear too predatory.

9. Finally, when Fremont's own troops threatened to mutiny, he had to admit his alliance with the Bears and incorporate them into his California Battalion. This group fought up and down the coast until 1847, at which time Fremont left the state and the battalion men were given honorable discharges, but no money. They were left to get home under their own resources. Some of the men stayed on in southern California, but most of the men of these two families returned to Napa County.

In face of all of the above, the Bears felt that they

were on their own, and took their protection upon themselves. General Vallejo offered no resistance. In fact, he was leader enough to realize that ever since California had fallen under Mexican, rather than Spanish rule, it was in a deteriorating condition. He was not adverse to living under American leadership.

When these men went to Vallejo's home in Sonoma, they were exhausted, hungry, and dirty. They had been in the saddle, without food or water, for over thirty hours, riding between the Sonoma area and Fremont's camp at Marysville. Vallejo fed them and gave them strong Mexican liquor. They were his friends and neighbors, and he could see they needed sustenance. If some of them fell asleep, it is little wonder.

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(NOTE: This material has been gleaned from too many souls and sources to enumerate, but I would like to give credit to Irving Stone and his Men to Match My Mountains, and especially to Mrs. Barbara R. Warner, San Juan Capistrano, California - herself a Bear and a Bear researcher.)

(EMN: Olive Bush added a note to this article. When Vallejo was being taken to Sacramento by the Bears, they stopped all night at the Pena Adobe (midway between Napa and Sacramento). There Vallejo was said to have been offered his freedom, which he refused. A Grigsby woman married into the Pena family, and a profile of a descendent of this line can be found under Joseph R. Pena.)