

THE FRENCH IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

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BACKGROUND

In the year 1542, the famous Captain Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed into San Diego Harbour. To our knowledge, he is the first European to set foot in what is now Upper California. He named this place San Miguel. In 1579, the noted English voyager, Sir Francis Drake, sailed along the Pacific coast, from Oregon to Mexico. He named the area New Albion, intending to claim it for Britain. Historians are doubtful, however, that Drake ever discovered San Francisco Bay.¹

Not until 1602, however, did Spain take any actual steps to possess and colonize the area we call California. In that year, the Viceroy of Mexico sent Don Sebastian Viscaíno on a voyage up the California coast. Viscaíno was delighted with the rich appearance of the country and stopped several times, once in "San Miguel" which he re-named San Diego, and in Monterey harbor, which he named after the viceroy who had sent him on his mission. However, no mention is made in his report of the discovery of San Francisco Bay. It is still as much a matter of doubt and conjecture as Drake's visit.²

No successful attempts at colonization were then made until the 1770's. At that time, Gaspar de Portala, who commanded the expedition, and Father Junipero Serra, who is today recognized as the founder of Upper California, came upon the Bay of San Francisco by the merest accident. In June, 1776, possession was taken of the area, and a presidio and mission were established.³

1. J. P. Munro-Fraser, History of Santa Clara County. San Francisco: Alley, Bowen and Co, 1881. p. 44.

2. Ibid., pp. 44-45.

3. Ibid., p. 45.

After the discovery of San Francisco Bay, establishment of missions and presidios was rapid. The Mission San Diego, in San Diego County, the first, was established in 1769. In January, 1777, the Mission Santa Clara, in Santa Clara County, was founded. The last mission, making a total of twenty-one, was the Mission San Francisco Solano, in Sonoma County, which was founded in 1823.⁴

At the time the mission was founded in Santa Clara, the valley was known as San Bernardino. The name "Santa Clara Valley" did not come into being until the year 1847.⁵ For purposes of clarity, however, the area will always be referred to as the Santa Clara Valley in this paper.

The area remained under Spanish control until the time of Mexican independence in the year, 1821. California, since it was considered a part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, also became independent of Spain at that time. Mexican rule in California was much more relaxed than had been Spanish rule. This is probably true for the simple reason that Mexico was having a difficult time maintaining a stable government for herself. Controlling an outlying area as far away from the capital city as California was a matter that could wait.

The Mexicans made a fatal mistake here, however, because there were other powers interested in the rich prize of California. These were France, Great Britain, and the United States. The influence of these countries through their agents and their citizens who moved to California was great.⁶ It finally appeared, though, that the strongest influence was

4. Munro-Fraser, op. cit., p. 46.

5. Amaury Mars, Reminiscences of Santa Clara Valley and San Jose. San Francisco: Artistic Publishing Co., 1901. p. 18.

6. Oscar Osburn Winther, "The Story of San Jose, 1777-1869," California Historical Society Quarterly. Vol. XIV, March 1935. pp. 17-18.

was to be American, by virtue of sheer numbers and of proximity. And in war between Mexico and the United States, from 1846 to 1848, California claimed independence of Mexico and almost immediately joined the United States.

The population of San Jose, the major city in Santa Clara County, did not grow very rapidly before the year 1840. In the following ten years, however, the population increased faster, due mainly to the swelling numbers of Americans who came.⁷ It was not, however, until the discovery of gold by John A. Sutter in 1848 that the population boom really began.

By 1901, the majority of the inhabitants of the valley, with the exception of the Americans, were the Italians, then the Irish, German, English and French following proportionately.⁸

7. Winther, op. cit., p. 18.

8. Mars, op. cit., p. 206.

ATTITUDE TOWARD FOREIGNERS IN CALIFORNIA

Spain's attitude toward foreigners was not a friendly one. Foreigners were not by any means welcomed. In Alta California, laws were passed putting severe restrictions on contacts with all non-Spanish people.⁹ These contacts included trade.

The temporary governor of California in 1792, José Joaquín de Arrillaga, made it quite clear that foreign vessels would be allowed to stop at California ports only in cases of emergency or only long enough to take on supplies.¹⁰ The residents were not permitted to trade with these vessels, but quite naturally there were flagrant disobediences of the law.

Although San José was not a port, it came under the rules pertaining to foreigners. An order from Monterey, at that time headquarters of Spanish government in California, dated November 2, 1795, was sent to the Corporal of the Guard at San José. The letter states that "No individual, regardless of his rank is to be permitted to go on board foreign ships." The regulation also forbids foreigners to either ride horseback or "to acquire a knowledge of the country." The hated outsiders were not to be furnished with any cattle capable of multiplying. No smuggling of any kind was to be allowed. The official who issued the order recommended, however, that aliens always be treated "with moderation and good manners." He also warned that any officer who failed to carry out his commands would be dealt with severely.

Five years later, in 1800, a similar order from the same source

9. Winther, op. cit., p. 10.

10. Ibid., p. 11.

11. Ibid.

prohibited non-residents, i.e., anyone not Spanish, from planting fields in San Jose without a license from the governor.¹²

Understandably, the execution of these strict orders proved to be almost impossible. The decrees applying to foreigners were variously interpreted according to the ideas of the persons requested to put them into effect.¹³

During the remaining years of Spanish rule, aliens continued to enter Alta California by both land and water routes. It was impossible to keep them out. French ships, as well as those flying the flags of Russia, England, and the United States, called at California ports very early in the 1800's. Nevertheless, it was not until the Mexican era that San Jose became a veritable mecca for those coming from foreign countries to establish their homes in "the land of opportunity."¹⁴

12. Winther, op. cit., p. 11.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., pp. 11-12

THE INTEREST OF OFFICIAL FRANCE IN CALIFORNIA

France played quite an important, although indirect role in the history of early California. Because of French activities, Mexico was able to gain her independence of Spain. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte, then emperor of France, had launched his armies into Spain, driving the Spanish king from his throne. Spain's struggle against the powerful Napoleon was a long and bitter one. The end of the Napoleonic Wars left Spain in a weak condition. And, when its vast colonies in the New World revolted in the 1820's, Spain was unable to re-establish its authority.¹⁵

France was not unaware of the vulnerability of California during the Mexican period. Her vast system of agents kept her well informed of goings on in the area. The position of France, however, forced her to play a very discreet role.¹⁶

France was quite successful in her attempt to cultivate the good will of the Californians. Her agents were most enthusiastically received. Her subjects were treated as natives rather than as foreigners.¹⁷ This was very unusual when we remember that California had traditionally been quite isolationistic, not tolerating, or even excluding all foreigners.

To give an example, when all other foreigners were being expelled from California, the rancheros (ranch owners) shouted before the houses of those Frenchmen living in the area that there were "No foreigners here;

15. Charles S. Cushing, "The Contention of the Nations for the San Francisco Bay Region," Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers.

16. Abraham P. Nasatir, French Activities in California. Stanford University: The Stanford University Press, 1945. p. 8

17. Ibid.

these people are French!" The name "foreigners" was reserved for the Americans and the English.¹⁸

This popularity of the French was not confined to the Californians. Captain Sutter, who was Swiss and who had founded the colony of New Helvetia on the Sacramento River, was violently pro-French. He said several times that he would hoist the French flag and call in French protection if this should prove advisable or necessary.¹⁹

In the year 1838, there occurred a small skirmish known as the Pastry War. The incident arose from claims by Frenchmen who were living in Mexico who had some of their property destroyed in an insurrection. It is known as the Pastry War because the major claim was brought by a baker, who declared that some of his goods had been destroyed. The result of the Pastry War was that France declared the ports of Mexico blockaded.²⁰ Exactly how France intended to enforce this blockade is a matter of speculation.

At that time, Great Britain decided to enter the matter. The British Ambassador informed France that since "Her Majesty's Government does not understand these words as referring to any other ports than those in the Gulf of Mexico on the Atlantic side of the continent, and if there should be no French force in the Pacific Ocean adequate to carry on an efficient blockade of the Mexican ports on that coast, any notification of blockade of these ports would, of course, be nugatory."²¹ The British apparently could not understand, either, just how France proposed to enforce this blockade.

18. Nasatir, op. cit., p. 9.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

This statement from the British was a warning to France. It is no wonder that demands for more French vessels in the Pacific were made repeatedly during the following years. That warning might have been just another item in the jealousy with which England and France viewed each other's actions with respect to Mexico. The New York Herald showed understanding of this feeling when it stated that "France has long looked with jealous eyes upon the movement of Great Britain in relation to Mexico. ... England has chipped off two or three little bits from Mexico, and is now about to make final arrangements for taking possession of the whole territory of California. ... To check this, France recognized Texas, and Texas lays claim to California."²²

In 1839, a young Frenchman, Eugene Dufot de Mofras, was sent by the French Foreign Office to investigate the Pacific Northwest. De Mofras traveled extensively in California, taking copious notes. He stated that out of the total white population of five thousand persons in Alta California, some eighty were French, located mainly at Monterey and Los Angeles.²³

The political aspects of De Mofras' visit must not be ignored. It must be remembered that this expedition was an official one sponsored by the French government. The leader was an official of the French government, directly responsible to the French Foreign Office, a fact which did not make for good relations between the envoy and the consul in California, the latter being by-passed quite often in reports.²⁴

That France had designs upon California is undeniable, particularly when the facts around De Mofras' visit are considered. De Mofras came

22. Nasatir, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

23. Ibid., p. 7.

24. Ibid., p. 15.

at a time when France was interested in expansion and the acquisition of colonial territory, at the close of a period of strained Franco-Mexican relations. There was a strong French-Canadian element among the trappers, and also, John A. Sutter had made several threats to call for French protection if such should prove necessary. There can be little doubt that France sent De Mofras as an agent to collect information about the Pacific region, entertaining hopes similar to those of England and the United States—that California might fall into her possession.²⁵

De Mofras was careful to note what Frenchmen resided at each point. He pointed out the importance of New Helvetia as essentially a French settlement. He particularly called attention to the friendship accorded to the French by the Californians. Moreover, De Mofras pointed out the identity of religion and temperament of the French and the Spanish. In fact, he was ^{so} impressed with the strength of the French influence in California that he believed the inhabitants would be favorably disposed toward French rule, should an opportunity be afforded to introduce it.²⁶

25. Nasatir, op. cit., p. 15.

26. Ibid.

FRENCHMEN IN CALIFORNIA

Probably the first permanent French settler was Jean Louis Vignes. He left Cadillac, a small town near Bordeaux in southern France, in 1817. He went to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), where he stayed for four years. Then he came to California and bought a farm near Los Angeles.²⁷

Most of the French natives who came to California prior to the gold rush did not come directly from France. Like Vignes, they came by a process of drifting from country to country. The early arrivals came from those countries nearest to California, particularly from Mexico, Chile, Peru, Hawaii, Tahiti, and the United States. Most Frenchmen coming from the United States came from Louisiana.²⁸

Beginning with the anchoring of La Mouze in September, 1849, and the disembarkation of some thirty settlers who had come directly from France, the stream of French immigrants direct to California was established.²⁹

Many French Canadians came to California, chiefly as traders and trappers for the Hudson's Bay and other fur companies. Among them were Michael Lamframboise and some of the La Jeunesses. It was the habit of these French and French-Canadian trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company of "Rendez-vous-ing" near Stockton, resulting in the town being named French Camp.³⁰

27. Nasatir, op. cit., p. 7.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

After gold was discovered in 1848, many ships left France for California bearing thousands of Frenchmen, lured by the promise of finding gold lying in the streets. By no means all these French adventurers struck it rich in California. Only a very few Frenchmen made millions in the gold areas. Most of the many companies formed were fiascoes. Most of the poor Frenchmen who had spent their last sous to pay their passage were deserted by the directors and left to the mercy of the consular agents of France who were resident in California. It was not only the gold seekers who were unsuccessful. Most of the commercial ventures of Frenchmen in California were also doomed to financial failure.³¹

Many of the Frenchmen who arrived in California, after not finding success as Argonauts, became hotel managers and owners, or engaged in business as hairdressers, bootblacks, cooks, and porteurs, or opened theaters and gambling houses. A few became prominent in the social life and became important bankers and importers. Most French businessmen at San Francisco, however, were not far-sighted and lost nearly all of their possessions in the San Francisco fire of 1850. Many French emigrants to California, not of the highest type, later, after being bitterly disappointed in the gold fields and other ventures, joined in the filibustering activities of their fellow countryman, Raousset-Boulbon.³²

31. Nasatir, op. cit., p. 37.

32. Ibid.

FRENCHMEN IN SANTA CLARA VALLEY

Although the Frenchmen in San Francisco and in the gold fields did not meet with much financial success, those Frenchmen who settled on the land became rather prosperous and quite well-liked. Several Frenchmen settled in the northern portion of the Santa Clara Valley, between San Jose and Mountain View, contributing no small share to the prosperity of the orchards and vineyards of that area.³³

One of the most famous orchardists of Santa Clara Valley was Louis Pellier. He introduced the French prune, or as we know it, the Santa Rose plum, to California.³⁴ If M. Pellier had not made this contribution to California agriculture, today we might be without one of our largest industries in Santa Clara Valley, the prune industry.

Ernest de Massey, who was at one time the French Vice-Consul at San Francisco, visited the San Jose area in the late summer of 1850. His description of the area indicates that he was not too favorably impressed with the collection of shacks and population he found. Nevertheless, he saw that truck gardeners in the area fared very well, so he bought a tract of land and settled there.³⁵

In Alviso, a Frenchman named Claro pitched his tent on the plot of ground later to be known as the plaza, in the year 1849.³⁶ There was also a hotel in Alviso named "The Four Musketeers," which was kept by a Frenchman named Marchand.³⁷

33. Mars, op. cit., p. 64.

34. Ibid., p. 188.

35. Winther, op. cit., pp. 154-155.

36. Munro-Fraser, op. cit., p. 245.

37. Ibid., p. 248.

Another resident of Alviso was Francois Tremoureaux. He was born in Saint-Nazaire, France, in 1840. At the age of nine he went to sea; he remained a sailor until he came to California in 1859. He came to Santa Clara County and was employed as a hired hand on a farm and later in a store in San Jose. In 1865 he purchased a farm of nine hundred acres suitable for stock raising. In 1871 he married Arabella Grant and they had two sons, Francois and Leonard. In 1878 he married again, to Mrs. Emma Webster, who had a daughter named Bertha. In 1880 they had a son whom they named Albert.³⁸

Probably the best known French resident of Gilroy was Charles Francois. He was born in France in 1819. In 1855 he emigrated to the United States, living in New York until 1861. He then moved to San Francisco, where he remained until he bought his farm of 180 acres in 1867. In 1853 he married Adele de Vaux, also a native of France. M. Francois had twenty-five acres of land in vineyards, producing about 25,000 gallons of wine and brandy annually.³⁹

Santa Clara's leading French citizen was John Jacob Laederick, who was born in Malhause, France, in 1822. In 1850 he came to California, where he worked in the southern mines for three years. He then went to San Francisco, where he conducted a fruit business. In 1859 he settled in Santa Clara County on a farm of 160 acres. In 1846 in France he married Luisa Weiss, and they had seven children: Edmund, Albert, Lottie, Emilie, Victor, Walter, and Emma. He died in 1874.⁴⁰

38. Munro-Fraser, op. cit., p. 560.

39. Ibid., p. 272.

40. Ibid., p. 668.

There were several Frenchmen living in Fremont. Lambert Dornberger was born in Alsace, France, in 1828, where he was educated. In 1852 he came to California via Panama from New York, where he had been living for two years. From 1854 to 1857 he lived about one mile from Mayfield. He then engaged in stock-raising near San Mateo County. In 1869 he again settled in Mayfield. He married Anna Kleinclaus, a native of France, in 1861. Their children are Eugene, Albert and Victor (twins), Anna, George, and Edward.⁴¹

Jules Mercier, a native of La Belle, France, also lived in Fremont. In 1852 he emigrated direct to San Francisco, where he had a wood and coal business until 1856. From then until 1864 he was master of the Adeline, a sloop that ran between San Francisco and the landing near Mayfield. Then he bought 160 acres of very good land about three miles north of Mayfield. In 1858 he married Adeline Ponce, a native of France.⁴²

But not all the Frenchmen who settled in Santa Clara County lived long and successful lives. Louis Lemercier, a Frenchman, who kept a grocery about eighteen miles south of San Jose, was murdered in 1885 at his house. The unfortunate man was shot twice and stabbed twenty-one times; the murderers were never apprehended, but suspicion rested on three Spaniards. They carried off \$350 in money, two boxes of cigars, a silver watch, and some clothing.⁴³

In 1848, Moerenhout, who was the French Consul at Monterey, was sent by the French government to the gold fields to investigate conditions. When he went through Santa Cruz, he found not a single American left. In

41. Munro-Fraser, op. cit., pp. 579-580.

42. Ibid., p. 584.

43. Ibid., pp. 220-221

San Jose all the foreigners were preparing to leave. The Frenchmen who were living there were about to go also. The saw mills where they had been working had stopped for lack of labor.⁴⁴

Moerenhout left San Jose accompanied by four other Frenchmen, Joseph la Bourdier, Pierre Leguere, Pipi, and Arnaud Maube. He was amazed at the high excitement in San Jose over the gold. Only about thirty of the usual 500 residents remained, and these thirty spoke of going too.⁴⁵

San Francisco gradually became more important as a result of the gold rush, and the importance of Monterey declined. M. Moerenhout then decided that a Consul was needed at Yerba Buena. He finally found a man in whom he recognized the necessary qualities for a French agent at San Francisco. This man was Etienne Jourdain, a businessman of San Jose. Jourdain was therefore appointed Consular Agent of France at Yerba Buena. However, business interests prevented Jourdain's assuming his duties. Moerenhout was not able to find another person of the same qualities, so he assumed the duties himself, traveling frequently to San Jose and San Francisco. He finally had to move to San Francisco.⁴⁶

Later, a Vice-Consul was appointed to take care of the duties in San Jose. The man appointed was Pedre de Saisset.⁴⁷

There were quite a few Frenchmen who settled in San Jose. One of the best known was D. M. Delmas. At the age of ten, 1849, he emigrated to San Jose to join his father. He attended Santa Clara College, receiving his B.A. in 1862 and his M.A. in 1863, carrying off the highest honors of

44. Jacques Antoine Moerenhout, The Inside Story of the Gold Rush. San Francisco: The California Historical Society, 1935. p. 2.

45. Ibid., p. 4.

46. Nasatir, op. cit., p. 31.

47. Mars, op. cit., p. 41.

his class. In 1865 he graduated in law from Yale University, and in the same year was admitted to the Supreme Court of Connecticut. In 1866, he returned to San Jose and was admitted to the Bar of the Supreme Court of California. In 1867 he was elected District Attorney of Santa Clara County. In 1876 he opened his own law office, the library of which had over 3000 volumes and was the largest and most complete private law library in the state. He was considered one of the most distinguished lawyers of his day. In 1869 he married Pauline and had four children, Delphine, Paul, Antoinette, and Josephine.⁴⁸

Another outstanding French resident of San Jose was A. Lagarde. He was born and educated in France. After taking part in the French Revolution of 1848, he joined the Garde Mobile. In 1851 he arrived in San Francisco, proceeding immediately to Bidwell's Bar on the Feather River to mine. From there he proceeded to the American River, and Greenwood Valley. In 1853 he returned to France for a year. After extensive traveling he landed in New York, and came to California by way of the old Santa Fe Trail. In 1858 he moved to San Jose and was employed by Lemoine, Gambert and Company of City Store for three years. He was then made a partner and stayed with them until 1876 when he established his own grocery store on the corner of Santa Clara and San Pedro Streets. He married Louise Leyour, a native of France, in 1860. They had six children: Jeanne, Alphonse, Louis, Delphin, Louisa, and Hortense.⁴⁹

Other French pioneers who settled in San Jose included Felix Sourisseau, who was a native of Marmande, France. He arrived in California with his father in February, 1849, and moved to San Jose in 1850. Dr. Jacques

⁴⁸. Munro-Fraser, op. cit., pp. 707-708.

⁴⁹. Ibid., pp. 716-717.

Savidan was the first veterinary surgeon in San Jose. He was born in St. Gilles, Les Bois, France, and was decorated by Napoleon with the Order of Crimée, as a warrior of Sebastopol. Mrs. Jacques Savidan was the daughter of Felix Sourisseau, and had joined her father in San Jose in 1852. They had a daughter whom they named Marie Josephine. Dr. Savidan's nephew, François Quement, also lived with them.⁵⁰

Other natives of France in San Jose were M. and Mme Pierre Baltz, natives of Alsace; Pierre Magendie, who was Vice President of the French National Celebration, Fall of the Bastille, in 1900 at San Jose; A. J. Minjoulet, Vice President of the French National Celebration, Fall of the Bastille, in 1899, at San Jose; Henry Gaignaire; Emile Coffe; Auguste Willot, a vineyardist; Jean Sibers and his family; M. and Mme Jean Auguste Richier; Mrs. Renee T. Lagrue; the Angousture family; M. Lasserre; Victor Cauhape; Leon Cartier; M. Turonnet; J. B. Carat; and M. Gussfeld.⁵¹

50. Mars, op. cit., pp. 260-261.

51. Ibid., pp. 183, 261, 262-263.

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