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Fremont's Scout, Alexis Godey: Indian Friend or Indian Killer?

IN THIS ISSUE:

Alexis Godey: Indian Friend or Indian Killer?  
William Bowden Phillips: Early Pioneer of Mariposa County  
Ho! For the Kern River: Andrew Smith Hallidie  
CTQ Book Reviews

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## Alexis Godey Indian Friend or Indian Killer?

By John W. Robinson

"You ask me where they went, those last poor Indians, the few that were left of all the two thousand that lived in the Cuyama Valley when the first whiteman came? Ay, Señor, it is sad, very sad." The gray-haired ranchero shook his head.

"But tell me, where did they go? I insisted.

"They did not go, they stayed, los pobrecitos. Go to the Cuyama Rancho, my friend—find the old adobe house of Alexandro Godey—the Indians are not far away."

I could hardly believe my ears. "You don't mean that they are still living there?"

"No, no my friend, you do not understand. They do not live, they are all dead, every one. There they lie, in a little rise of ground, not far from the house of Alexandro Godey. Si, señor, there they lie, men, women and little children, forty-two of them in all, dead of poison!"

"Poison!" I gasped. "Was...was it an accident?"

"Ah, no, señor, it was no accident. On purpose, a proposito, he fed them poison, that shameless one, Godey...he and his two wicked vaqueros, especially that devil Ramirez, the one they call "El Chihuahua."

The mass murder supposedly occurred during a "fiesta" Godey provided for the Indian families, sometime in the 1860s. Godey allegedly plied them with wine, then fed them poisoned meat. After all forty-two were dead, Godey and his ranchhands supposedly buried their bodies on a knoll near the ranchhouse. The motive? Godey is said to have believed that the Indians stole some of his cattle.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote Mark R. Harrington in his "Alexander

Godey: Hero or Villain?" that appeared in the June 1933 issue of Touring Topics, an Automobile Club of Southern California travel magazine now called Westways. The story of mass murder was repeated by Theresa Colwes in "The Man Behind the Cuyama Valley Indian Massacre" that appeared in The Californians, Volume 12, No. 3 (1995). Ms. Colwes used the Harrington article as her sole reference.

Mark R. Harrington (1882-1971) was a well-known anthropologist, most noted for his study of Native American sites all over the Southwest. He was also a story teller, with several novels to his credit, as his widow Marie Harrington points out in On the Trail of Forgotten People: A Personal Account of the Life and Career of Mark Raymond Harrington.<sup>2</sup> Ms. Harrington includes an extensive bibliography of all of his writings; it is interesting to note that not once did Harrington ever again write about the alleged Cuyama massacre. This despite the fact that he was seriously challenged to do so by Frank Latta.

The late Frank F. Latta was for many years a leading Kern County historian, with many books and articles to his credit. He was a friend of Native Americans, the author of Handbook of Yokuts Indians (1949; revised 1977), an extensive study of the Yokuts Indians of the southern San Joaquin Valley. Harrington's fiesta poisoning story caused quite a stir in the San Joaquin Valley, where there were still, in 1933, people who knew Alex Godey. Frank Latta set out to investigate the story. Latta interviewed everyone he could find, both whites and Native Americans, who might have had knowledge of the terrible incident. He published his findings in "Alexis Godey in Kern County," which appeared in the Fifth Annual Publication, Kern County Historical Society (November 1939). Here is what Latta wrote about the Harrington story: "As this article was widely circulated and had led many persons to look upon Mr. Godey as a murdering monster of the lowest type, it has been necessary to present in

this paper the statements of several pioneers who know that the accusations are entirely false, that there were no Indians in Cuyama to poison in the 1860s and that Mr. Godey was not the person to poison anyone."<sup>3</sup>

Among those interviewed by Latta was José Jesus Lopez, for almost 50 years "majordomo" (foreman) on the Tejon Ranch. Lopez stated, "There is absolutely no truth, nor a particle of truth, in the story about Alexis Godey poisoning Indians in Cuyama Valley. My father had known Godey in 1847 and he was one of the first men I met in Kern County. I knew him from 1873 until he died about 1889. I knew almost every one of the Indians, Mexicans and Paisanos in the entire southern San Joaquin Valley and if Godey had ever poisoned any Indians in that locality I would have learned of it."<sup>4</sup>

Latta journeyed to Santa Barbara during his quest to find the truth, interviewing Cesar Lataillade, son of Caeserio Arnaud Lataillade, original grantee of Rancho Cuyama in 1846. It was on this grant in the Cuyama Valley where the alleged poisoning is said to have taken place. Lataillade told Latta that "Until it was brought to my attention today I had never heard of anyone poisoning any Indians in the Cuyama Valley. Godey could not have poisoned any Indians there later than 1865, to my personal knowledge. I know from statements made by my mother and Mr. Orena [ranch foreman] definitely that there were absolutely no Indians there to poison when they stocked the place with cattle many years before. No, that story about Godey poisoning Indians in Cuyama is absolutely wrong. Nothing like that could have been done, even if there had been Indians there, without us knowing it or hearing about it."<sup>5</sup>

Latta learned that Godey was apparently well liked by the Indians of the San Joaquin Valley. "They were more friendly with him than they were with any other white person."<sup>6</sup>

Who was this man accused of a heinous act of mass murder, but stoutly defended by those who knew him?

Alexander (or Alexis) Godey led a life of extreme adventure. He was born of French Canadian parents in St. Louis, Missouri, probably in 1818. Nothing is known about his formative years. In 1833, around the age of 15, young Alexis joined a fur trapping expedition into the Rocky Mountains led by Captain Benjamin Bonneville. From the trappers'

summer rendezvous on the Green River in Wyoming, Bonneville dispatched Joseph R. Walker and a party of 40 mountain men on a year-long trapping foray into the Mexican province of California. Godey was a member of Walker's expedition that traversed the deserts of the Great Basin, battled Paiute Indians, crossed the Sierra Nevada—where they became the first white men to look down into Yosemite Valley from the north rim. After spending the winter in the Monterey-San Juan Bautista area of central California, Walker's party journeyed south through the San Joaquin Valley and recrossed the Sierra via a gap near the southern end of the great natural barrier that later became known as Walker Pass. This was Godey's first visit to the southern end of California's great Central Valley that would later become his home.<sup>7</sup>

Sometime in the late 1830s, after the golden age of fur trapping was nearing its end, Alexis Godey was employed as a hunter at Fort St. Vrain, a trading outpost near the site of present-day Denver, Colorado. Godey was known as an expert marksman with a rifle, and his job was to supply fresh meat—bear, deer, and mountain goat—for the 40 or 50 residents of the fort.

It was a warm July day in 1843 when Lieutenant

Frank Latta Collection



Alexander Godey, 1818-1889

John C. Fremont of the U.S. Army's Topographic Engineers Corps rode into Fort St. Vrain at the head of his second expedition. It was here that Alexis Godey first met Fremont, a man who would play an important part in his life for the next 20 years. Fremont was on his way to Oregon with a large party of scientists and adventurers bent on surveying the West. Godey and another young trapper destined

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John Charles Fremont (above) chose Alexis Godey as one of his most trusted scouts on his 2nd, 3rd, and 4th expeditions.

for greatness, Christopher "Kit" Carson, were signed on to accompany Fremont's expedition.<sup>8</sup>

It was on Fremont's second expedition that both Godey and Carson proved their boldness, their skill at scouting, and warding off Indian attacks, and their loyalty to earn their place among the great pathfinder's most trusted associates. The expedition followed the Oregon Trail through South Pass to the Columbia River, turned south through central Oregon to Klamath Lake and, as winter arrived, reached the site of present-day Reno, Nevada. Rather than spending the cold months in this bleak place, Fremont opted to cross the mighty Sierra

Nevada in mid-winter. Godey and Carson scouted ahead and climbed nearby peaks to discover the best route westward. Battling deep snowdrifts and howling winds, the exhausted party finally struggled out of the mountains and reached the welcomed sanctuary of Sutter's Fort. After a short period of recuperation, Fremont and his men headed south through the Central Valley to Tehachapi Creek,

Courtesy Kit Carson Museum



Christopher "Kit" Carson, along with Alexis Godey, signed on to accompany John Fremont's second expedition as scouts after Fremont rode into Fort St. Vrain in July 1843, the site of present-day Denver, Colorado.

crossed Oak Creek Pass into the Mojave Desert, and reached the Old Spanish Trail a few miles north of Cajon Pass. They followed the trail northeast along the Mojave River to its sink at Soda Lake.

It was here, along the Old Spanish Trail, that Godey and Carson were involved in an incident that was to haunt them for years. A marauding band of desert Indians, probably Paiutes, had attacked a small party of Mexicans who were herding horses along the trail ahead of Fremont's party. Two survivors of the Mexican group, fleeing west, ran into Fremont and reported that the Indian renegades had murdered some members of the party, stolen

the horses, and kidnapped two women. Godey and Carson received Fremont's permission to go after the renegades and recapture the stolen horses. The two scouts hurried east on the trail and early the next morning surprised the encamped Paiutes, who they said numbered about 20, killed two of them, drove the rest off, and rescued the horses. They proceeded to scalp the two dead Indians and galloped back into Fremont's camp with the bloody evidence.<sup>9</sup> Next day the expedition came across the naked and badly mutilated bodies of the two kidnapped women.

Fremont's second expedition was back in St. Louis by August 1844. A year later, in the summer of 1845, Alexis Godey was in Missouri again with Fremont, ready to depart on yet another expedition, the great pathfinder's third, that would take them back to California and into the Mexican War. Traveling west across the Great Plains, the expedition reached Bent's Fort in southern Colorado. Here Fremont assembled the greatest entourage of mid-19th century mountain men ever to come together. The list included Kit Carson, Alexis Godey, Joseph Walker, Richard Owens, Theodore Talbot, Basil Lajeunesse, and Edward Kern, the latter who replaced Preuss as topographer. Also included was a small party of Delaware Indians, intensely loyal to Fremont.

Fremont considered Kit Carson, Dick Owens, and Alex Godey his most trusted trio: "The three, under Napoleon, might have become marshals, Carson, of great courage, quick and complete perception..., Godey, insensible to danger, of perfect coolness and stubborn resolution; Owens, equal in courage to the others, and in coolness equal to Godey."<sup>10</sup>

Fremont was determined to take a more direct route to California. His third expedition, now 60 strong, crossed the Rockies to the headwaters of the Grand (now Colorado) River, followed the swollen watercourse westward until it veered south, continued west to the Great Salt Lake, and traversed the Great Basin via the Humboldt River to Walker Lake, directly below the eastern rampart of the Sierra Nevada. Here Fremont divided his party: Walker, Godey, Owens and Kern went south through Owens Valley and crossed Walker Pass into the south end of California's great Central Valley. (Three of Fremont's southern party are remembered by important landmarks today: Owens Valley, Walker Pass, and the Kern River. Fremont, with Kit Carson, crossed the Sierra very close to Donner Lake. After

some confusion as to where the two parties should rendezvous, they rejoined and headed toward the Californio capital of Monterey. Californio Commandante José Castro ordered the interlopers to leave the Mexican province. Fremont, after defying Castro for several days atop what he called Hawk's Peak (in today's Fremont State Park east of Salinas), led his force north up the Sacramento Valley and around Mount Shasta to Klamath Lake. Here, on May 9, 1846, Marine Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie raced into Fremont's camp, reportedly with a message from President Polk. The contents of Gillespie's missive has never come to light, but whatever was conveyed by the Marine officer caused Fremont to abruptly change his plans and hurry back into California.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently the excitement caused by Gillespie's arrival and the prospect of war with Mexico caused Fremont to relax his usual camp guard. Around midnight Carson was awakened by a dull, squishy thud, which proved to be the splitting of Basil Lajeunesse's head by an Indian axe. Carson shouted the alarm and grabbed his rifle, as did Godey who was standing nearby, unpreturbed by the immediate threat. "He was the most thoroughly insensible to danger of all the brave men I have known," Fremont later wrote.<sup>12</sup> The night attack by a band of Klamaths was beaten off, but not before two more of Fremont's men were killed. Next day Fremont allowed Kit Carson to lead his Delaware Indians on an attack of a nearby Klamath village, killing 20 probably innocent villagers.

Fremont and his men hurried south to Sutter's Fort, where he learned of the Bear Flag Revolt. A group of Anglo settlers, trappers, and run-away sailors in Sonoma seized the town on June 14, 1846. They made Californio Commandante-*Général* Mariano Vallejo a prisoner of war, raised the Bear Flag, and traveled to Sutter's Fort. Fremont took command of the Bear Flaggers and marched his unruly band of citizen soldiers to San Francisco, where they met an American naval force and received confirmation that the U.S. and Mexico were officially at war.<sup>13</sup>

At Fremont's suggestion, Alexis Godey was commissioned a lieutenant and assigned to serve under the command of Archibald Gillespie. Gillespie's small force sailed south to San Pedro and marched inland to capture the pueblo of Los Angeles. A few weeks later the Californios, resentful of the marine lieutenant's harsh restrictions, revolted and forced Gillespie and his men to leave the pueblo and debark



After being surprised in a night attack, Kit Carson led Fremont's men and his Delaware Indians on a punitive raid against a Klamath village on the Williamson River, putting it to the torch and killing at least 20 probably innocent Klamath Indians.

from San Pedro. They sailed south to San Diego, the only southern California town still in American hands after the Californio revolt. Here they came under the command of Commodore Robert Stockton and his naval force.

Meanwhile, Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny and his small "Army of the West," was marching west from Santa Fe, New Mexico via the Southern Emigrant Trail. Commodore Stockton, learning of Kearny's approach, sent a small force to guide him into San Diego. Among those dispatched to aid Kearny was Alexis Godey and another young man soon destined to play a part in Godey's life, Edward Fitzgerald Beale. On December 6, 1846, Kearny's force was mauled by Andrés Pico's Californio Lancers at San Pasqual, a small valley about 28 miles northeast of San Diego. Nineteen of Kearny's men were killed, most of them victims of the long lances



Robert Stockton



Stephen Kearny

yielded so skillfully by the superb Californio horsemen. Entrapped on a small rise the soldiers called "Mule Hill," Godey, Beale, and Kit Carson, who had

guided Kearny's army west, was dispatched to sneak through enemy lines to request Stockton's help in San Diego. They made it through, although Godey was captured by the Californios on the return trip.<sup>14</sup>

Commodore Stockton sent a force of sailors and marines to rescue Kearny's men, who safely reached San Diego a few days later. But Godey remained Pico's prisoner and accompanied the Californio north to Los Angeles. What one might call, using current military terms, a "pincer movement," the Californios were defeated. Fremont and his California Battalion of Mounted Riflemen came down from the north, and Stockton and Kearny's joint army-navy-marine force moved north from San Diego. On January 13, 1847, Andres Pico, commandante of the Californio forces, signed the "Articles of Capitulation," surrendering to Lieutenant Colonel John C. Fremont (his new rank, courtesy of Commodore Stockton), at Campo de Cahuenga, a small adobe home in what is now North Hollywood. Alexis Godey, who had been treated with the utmost courtesy by Pico, was released to Fremont.<sup>15</sup>

Fremont was appointed temporary military governor of California by Commodore Stockton and appeared to be at the apex of his career. But such was not to be. The pathfinder became involved in a bitter dispute with General Kearny over the administration of military affairs in California and was charged with insubordination. (A lieutenant colonel who defies the orders of a brigadier general does so at his own risk.) He was ordered to accompany Kearny east to stand trial in a highly-publicized court-martial (although Fremont wasn't told about his court-martial until after he left California with Kearny). Alexis Godey, always loyal to Fremont, accompanied his mentor to the nation's capital where he testified in Fremont's behalf. Nevertheless, Fremont was found guilty of "disobedience of a lawful command by a superior officer." Although immediately pardoned by President Polk, Fremont, in anger and frustration, resigned his army commission.<sup>16</sup>

To rebuild his tarnished image, Fremont was determined to continue his explorations. However, the two ensuing expeditions would be privately funded. Supported by his father-in-law, Senator Thomas Benton, Fremont organized an expedition to locate a railroad route from St. Louis to California. As usual, loyal Alexis Godey would accompany his mentor, along with 21 other recruits. The old mountain man Bill Williams was hired to guide the party over Cochetopa Pass in the Colorado Rockies in mid-win-

ter, even though Fremont had been warned that this was an extremely hazardous undertaking. The expedition, Fremont's fourth, ended up a disaster. Ten of the 22 froze to death in blinding snowstorms and 20-below temperatures. The rest were saved thanks to the heroism of Alexis Godey. "Tougher and stronger than any man of the expedition," Godey, in a remarkable exploit, led a half-crazed Fremont out of the frozen wilderness to Kit Carson's home in Taos, New Mexico. (Fremont was so emaciated and whiskered that Carson did not recognize him until he spoke.) Leaving Fremont to recuperate, Godey personally organized a relief expedition to save the remaining members of Fremont's party. Retracing his route back into the icy-cold mountains, in a trip covering 320 miles in 20 days, Godey personally brought the eleven half-frozen survivors out to

Denver Public Library



Kit Carson and an emaciated and whiskered John Charles Fremont in Taos, New Mexico after the disastrous 4th expedition where ten men froze to death in the Colorado Rockies. Alexis Godey saved Fremont and 11 others.

John Charles Fremont, "Memoirs"

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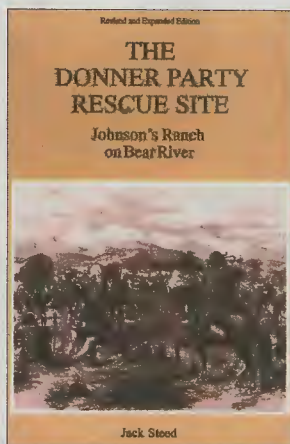
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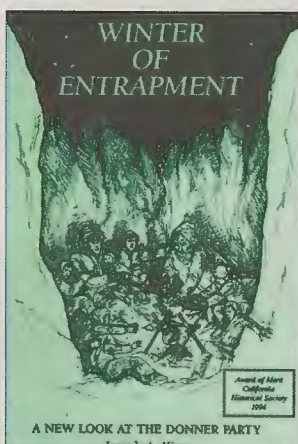


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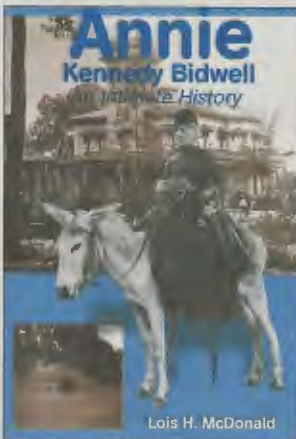
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Fremont's midwinter attempt to cross the San Juan Mountains in the lower Colorado Rockies resulted in death and failure for members of his 4th expedition.

Taos.<sup>17</sup>

Godey accompanied a chastised Fremont to California via the southern snow-free route, the Gila Trail, then north to Fremont's Las Mariposas Rancho, in the foothills west of Yosemite. Fremont had purchased the land grant in 1848, and a short time later gold was discovered in some of its streambeds. Fremont set up a sizable placer mining operation with Godey's help. Working the watercourses around the present-day town of Mariposa, moderate amounts of gold were recovered. To this day, one of the ravines in the area bears Godey's name. Fremont appeared destined for great wealth, but such was not to be. Las Mariposas was overwhelmed by hundreds of eager prospectors who ignored Fremont's claim to the area, and Fremont, encumbered by debt and several poor decisions, eventually lost the



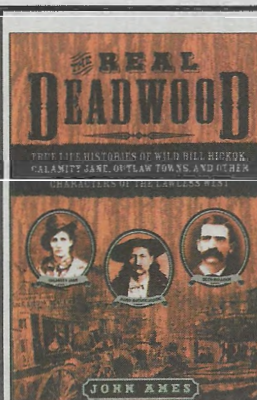
entire grant.<sup>18</sup>

By the year 1849 Godey was 31 years old, and in those 31 years he crammed more adventure, more harrowing excitement, than most men twice his age. But his wide-ranging travels now came to an end. The remaining 40 years of his life were spent mostly in and around the southern San Joaquin Valley.

He briefly managed a hotel in San Juan Bautista, and married Maria Antonia Coronel of the prominent Californio family. The marriage did not last. Maria Antonia had the bonds annulled after she discovered him "dallying" with a young Indian woman. If Godey had a weakness, it was his life-long fondness for women, both Indian and Hispanic. Over the years he had five legal marriages, all but the last ending in divorce, and at least eight common-law "wives," some as young as 14.<sup>19</sup>

By 1851 he was back at Las Mariposas, running cattle for Fremont. Fremont had sought and obtained a lucrative contract from the Indian Commission to supply beef to six Indian reservations set up temporarily by the commissioners in the San Joaquin Valley and Sierra foothills. Fremont purchased 3,000 head of cattle in the Los Angeles area at a nominal price and hired Godey to drive them north. Starting from Mission San Fernando, Godey and his several vaqueros drove the stumping, bawling herd north over Tejon Pass into the Central Valley. Along the way, Godey delivered several hundred animals to the Tejon, Tulare Lake, Kaweah, Kings River, San Joaquin, and Fresno reservations. Despite the loss of 400 head during the drive, Fremont's profits were considerable. He received a draft for \$142,500 from the Secretary of the Interior, plus several more smaller drafts for providing 140,000 pounds of butchered beef to the reservations.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for the Indians, the reservations set up by the commissioners were rejected by the U.S. Senate.

In 1852 Godey was operating a ferry on the San Joaquin River a few miles south of the present community of Firebaugh. We next hear of him at the small community of Woodville, on the Kaweah River about eight miles east of present-day Visalia, in August 1853. Here he was contacted by Lieutenant Robert S. Williamson of the Pacific Railroad Survey. The survey was an effort by the Army Corps of Topographic Engineers, authorized by Congress and directed by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, to locate a feasible route for a transcontinental railway. Six cross-country routes were proposed



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for study.

The Pacific Railroad Survey party under Lieutenant Williamson was directed to explore possible routes through central and southern California to connect with the proposed 32nd and 35th parallel transcontinental routes. Williamson's immediate objective in August 1853 was to find a route suitable for a railroad from the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley over the mountains to Owens Valley and the Mojave Desert. Williamson later wrote in his report: "Here [at Woodville] I was fortunate enough to meet with Mr. Alexander Godey, a most excellent and experienced mountaineer who knew more, perhaps, about the mountain passes in the Sierra Nevada—which I was about to examine—than any one in the country."<sup>21</sup>

Godey guided the Williamson party up the Kern River to Walker Pass and to several other notches in the mountain crest to the south. They then checked out Tehachapi Pass, which Williamson recommended as the only feasible route for a railroad over the mountain barrier. (The Southern Pacific Railroad utilized the Williamson report when they laid their rails over Tehachapi Pass in 1875-76.)

Godey accompanied the railroad survey party as far as the mouth of Tejon Canyon. Here he came in

contact with Edward F. Beale, who was destined to influence Godey's life for the next decade.

Edward Fitzgerald Beale (1822-1893) was a participant in California history from 1846 until well into the 1870s. Like Godey, he led a life of great adventure. Although beginning his career as an Annapolis graduate and a naval officer, Beale spent most of his life on land. During the Mexican War he participated in the Battle of San Pasqual, where André Pico's Californio lancers severely mauled Brigadier General Kearny's Army of the West. It was here he met Alex Godey. Both men slipped through Mexican lines to inform Commodore Stockton in San Diego of Kearny's plight. Following James Marshall's gold discovery in 1848, Beale carried 23 ounces of California gold across Mexico and up the east coast to Washington, D.C., proving to President Polk that the discovery was genuine and igniting the Gold Rush. In 1852, thanks to his friendship with John C. Fremont and Senator Thomas Benton, Beale was appointed Indian Superintendent for California.<sup>22</sup>

One of Beale's first actions as Indian Superintendent was to find land, away from American miners and settlers, for Indian reservations. In early 1853 Beale proposed three reservations in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Only one of the three was actually established. Beale named it the Sebastian Reservation in honor of William K. Sebastian, chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. It was more commonly known as the Tejon Reservation, as it lay at the mouth of Tejon Canyon.

Beale hired Alexis Godey as the reservation interpreter at \$3,000 per year (a goodly sum in those



Tejon Indians, as sketched by a Pacific Railroad Survey artist, 1853.

California Room, California State Library/Now in Bear State Library



Edward Fitzgerald Beale

days.) Godey quickly became an important assistant, as Beale later acknowledged: "His wonderful knowledge of the country, and great influence with the tribes of the mountains enabled me through him to preserve peace in the Joaquin Valley, and [through his rapport with the Indians] I was constantly appraised of every important occurrence among the tribes in that portion of the State."<sup>23</sup>

Alexis Godey had a unique relationship with the local Indians. José Jesus Lopez, later foreman on the Tejon Ranch, knew him well: "In many respects Godey was a natural Indian himself. He would leave the best society to go to an Indian ceremony. I have seen him come to Rancho El Tejon and spend a week at the Indian rancheria there. While there he would take part in all of the Indian activities. He would put on a breech clout and moccasins and paint himself like the Indians and dance with them by the hour. He was better liked by the Indians than any other white man who ever lived in Kern County."<sup>24</sup>

Godey soon had his hands full, not only working with the Indians and planting crops on the Tejon Reservation but also managing Rancho San Emigdio,

located at the mouth of San Emigdio Canyon about 20 miles west of the reservation. The San Emigdio land grant was awarded to José Antonio Dominguez of Santa Barbara by Governor Juan Bautista Alvarado in 1842. It consisted of four square leagues (17,709 acres) of cultivatable land, watered by San Emigdio Creek, at the extreme south end of the San Joaquin Valley (then known as Valle de los Tulares). The Dominguez heirs sold an undivided half interest in Rancho San Emigdio to John C. Fremont in 1851.<sup>25</sup> Fremont called on his long-time friend Alexis Godey to oversee the crops and tend the cattle and sheep on the rancho. Godey greatly expanded the livestock operation at San Emigdio. He was given a contract to supply beef and mutton to the army at Fort Tejon from 1855 to 1861. When Beale purchased Rancho La Liebre in the Antelope Valley in 1855, he hired Godey to oversee his livestock there. Fremont's former trusted scout was a busy man throughout the 1850s.

About 15 miles west of San Emigdio, at the extreme southwestern corner of Kern County, is the arid Cuyama Valley. Sometime in the mid-1860s, after the federal land commission denied Rancho Cuyama to the Lataillade heirs of Santa Barbara, Godey laid claim to the northern end of the valley and brought in 1,000 head of cattle. He built a small adobe on a knoll near the north end of the valley and hired several vaqueros to tend his livestock there. But when an act of Congress in 1872 returned the land to the Lataillade heirs, Godey gave up his Cuyama Ranch without complaint.<sup>26</sup>

An incident occurred at the Cuyama Ranch that may have had some basis for the later charge of mass murder, but Godey was not involved. A vaquero hired by Godey named Leonardo, known as El Chihuahua, sexually assaulted an Indian woman. While the assault was in progress, the woman's Mexican husband appeared. Leonardo killed both of them to prevent his act from being revealed, then fled to



San Emigdio Ranch was Alexander Godey's home from 1855 to 1883 and was located at the extreme south end of the San Joaquin Valley at the mouth of San Emigdio Canyon.

Mexico, never to return.<sup>27</sup>

Beale was appointed Surveyor General of California by President Lincoln in 1861. In this position, Lincoln is said to have complained that Beale became "Master of all he surveyed." Over the ensuing five years the great entrepreneur combined his La Lebre grant, obtained in 1855, with three other land grants into his massive Rancho El Tejon, stretching from the southern San Joaquin Valley over the Tehachapi Mountains to Antelope Valley and the Liebre Mountain foothills—some 203,000 acres in all. In 1863 he formed a partnership with Alexis Godey to manage his livestock operation. The partnership lasted only a year; Beale dissolved it in 1864.<sup>28</sup>

Godey spent most of the late 1860s and 1870s on Rancho San Emigdio. He was most responsible for developing Pueblo de San Emigdio, a small community that consisted of Godey's two-story house, a blacksmith shop, store, and several other buildings. By 1872 the population in and around the village included some 50 paisanos, persons of mixed Mexican and Indian blood, and about 150 full-blooded Indians, who were employed as cattle and sheep herders, shearers, and handymen.<sup>29</sup> Beale had purchased Fremont's half ownership in the rancho in 1869, and Godey had subsequently obtained, probably with Beale's help, some proprietary interest.

An amusing incident involving Godey's use of Indian labor, was related by Frank Latta:

"Godey was using Indian labor to improve the grounds and vicinity of the San Emigdio Ranch house. He had employed a foreman who used a glass eye.

"When the foreman would leave, the Indians would do only about one-half as much work as when he was watching them. He tried in every way to keep them moving. He would come upon them unexpectedly and would hide and watch them, but all to no effect. They would idle away their time as soon as he was gone. At the suggestion of Mr. Godey, the foreman took out his glass eye and placed it on top of a nearby post. Then he spoke a few words to it in an undertone and left the place. Those Indians worked like mad while he was gone. When he came back, and placed the eye where it belonged, they were tremendously relieved and begged him to not leave it to watch them again. He did not need to. They worked harder when he was gone."<sup>30</sup>

Alex Godey's appearance and mannerisms were described to Frank Latta by one Z.T. Blankenship:

"When I lived at San Emigdio in the 1870s Alec Godey used to come down to my cabin and stay a day or two at a time. He would talk for hours of old times. He was not a braggart, but was rather quiet and retiring about his exploits with Fremont. His talk was generally about times at Fort Tejon after the Mexican War.

"When I knew Godey he was a man well along in years. He was very careful of his personal appearance and was quite proud of his popularity among the ladies.

"A man above medium height, Godey was broad of shoulders and as lithe and active as a cat. I remember so well his long fingers and slender hands and wrists. He spoke very good English, having only a slight French accent. He had, in addition to a determined mouth, very dark deep-set piercing eyes that could almost burn a hole through a person. Brave as could be, he had a determined streak and was dangerous when he thought he was being imposed upon.

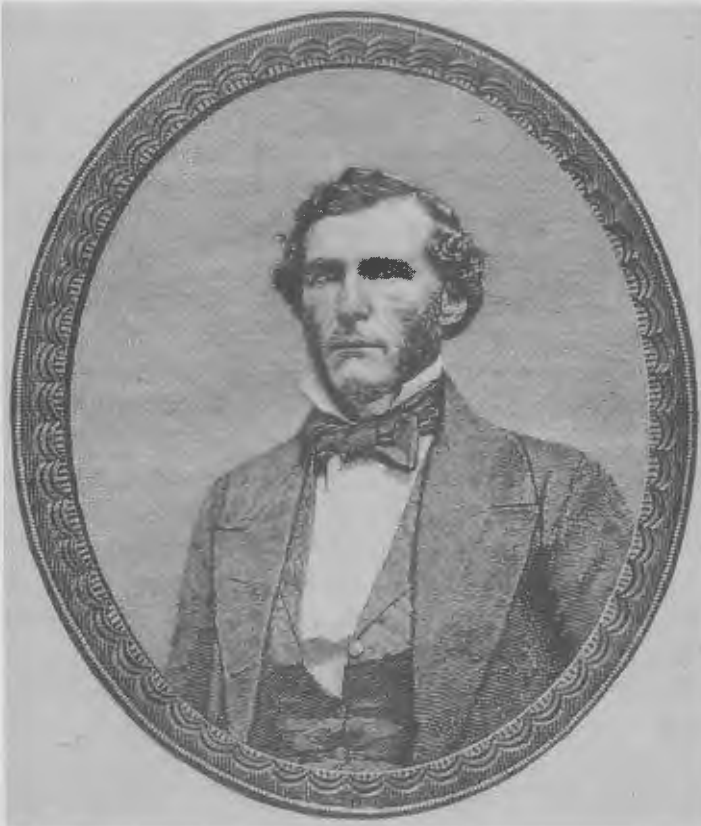
"Godey was a very generous man. If he liked a person there was no limit to his generosity. He used to load up a wagon in Bakersfield with provisions and liquor and drive to the various adobes and give food to each of the Mexican and Indian families. He was a good-hearted fellow in many respects, but he always would have his own way."<sup>31</sup>

José Jesus Lopez, long-time foreman of Rancho El Tejon, knew Godey well for many years. He described Godey as "one of the most remarkable men ever I had known. He was modest and quiet-spoken, but spoke with a determination and positiveness that left no room for question of any sort... His one weakness was women, and he had from time to time possibly six to eight common-law wives."<sup>32</sup>

Alexis Godey lived at and managed San Emigdio until 1883. In that year the 19,000-acre rancho was sold to Kern County land developer J.F. Haggin by its several owners. Godey received \$2,000 in gold coin for his share of the ranch and moved to Bakersfield.

He married his fifth wife, 14-year-old Maria Jimenez, and built a large home on 19th Street which he called Belmont Grove. Now a man of some means, he subdivided the surrounding 80 acres which became known as the Godey Tract.<sup>33</sup>

In late 1888 Godey attended a circus that had come to Bakersfield. In attempting to pet a lion



This illustration of Alexis Godey appeared in Century Magazine in 1891, two years after he died on January 19, 1889 at Sisters Hospital in Los Angeles, California. He was 71 years old.

through the bars of a cage, he received a deep scratch on the back of one hand. The scratch eventually healed, but Godey's health began to fail. He was taken to Los Angeles, where he died at the Sisters Hospital, 71 years of age, on January 19, 1889. He was buried at the Union Cemetery in Bakersfield beside one of his three sons, Alexis Godey, Jr., who had died in 1877.<sup>34</sup>

Alexander Godey had been deceased 44 years when Mark Harrington published his article in Touring Topics accusing him of mass murder. Harrington and later Ms. Colwes in The Californians, "set up" Godey as an Indian killer by pointing out a well-known incident during Fremont's second expedition when Godey and Kit Carson tracked down a band of Paiute horsethieves in the Mojave Desert, killed two of them, and brought their bloody scalps back to camp. This was indeed an unfortunate act, but not men-

tioned is the fact that these renegade Paiutes had killed and horribly mutilated two kidnapped Mexican women. Also mentioned is another incident during Fremont's third expedition when, after a night attack by Klamath Indians that killed three sleeping men, Fremont allowed Kit Carson to lead his men and the Delaware Indians on a raid on a nearby Klamath village during which more than 20 Indians were killed and the village was destroyed and burned to the ground. Fremont's act of vengeance is difficult to justify. All that can be said is that atrocities were committed by both sides.<sup>35</sup>

Alex Godey was certainly not without his faults. He was known as a "Squaw Man" for his romantic involvement with many young Indian women. But neither his fondness of Native American women nor his actions, real and supposed, under Fremont's command should be used as evidence that he was a mass murderer of innocent men, women, and children.

The story itself strains credence. Harrington supposedly heard it from an unnamed "gray-haired ranchero." Did the old ranchero witness the crime? No, he learned of it from his uncle in Mexico, who in turn, heard it from a priest, who got the story from an old man known as El Chihuahua in confession. Would a priest reveal to others what he heard in confession? To do so would violate the sanctity of the confessional. It's possible but seems highly unlikely unless it might save a life, which was not the case here. The alleged confessed crime occurred many years before.

To give substance to the story, more evidence is needed than what appears in the 1933 Touring Topics and the 1995 The Californians articles. Who was "the gray-haired ranchero" who supposedly told the story? Even better would be an attempt to locate the alleged mass grave. If it exists it should not be hard to find. Harrington's story says it was on a knoll not far from Godey's Cuyama ranchhouse, the general location of which is known. Numerous archaeological studies have been undertaken in the past in the Cuyama Valley. While ancient Indian village and burial sites have been located, no mass grave has ever been found.<sup>36</sup>

Otherwise this tale must remain a mythical will-o'-the-wisp, which Webster defines as something "that deludes or misleads by luring on." Enough real injustices have been committed against Native Americans without resorting to fanciful tales.

Photo by Frank Latta, 1931/Bear State Library



Alexis Godey was buried in the Union Cemetery in Bakersfield, California next to his son Alexis Godey, Jr. who had died before him in 1877 when he was only 20-years-old.

#### About the Author:

John Robinson is a native Californian born in Long Beach. He graduated from the University of Southern California in 1951 with a B.A. and from California State University, Long Beach in 1966 with an M.A. Prior to his retirement he taught school for 35 years, the last 32 in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District in Orange County.

John recently completed his latest book, Gateways to Southern California which documents and illustrates the Indian footpaths, horse trails, wagon roads, railways and highways of Southern California. He has personally traversed nearly every one of them.

John recently returned from a Baltic cruise after spending some hectic time in London's Heathrow Airport which was under an extremely high security alert at the time. His flight to Copenhagen to meet his ship was cancelled, but he was later able to fly to Stockholm to catch up with the cruise ship.

#### End Notes

1. M.R. Harrington, "Alexander Godey: Hero or Villain?" Touring Topics (monthly magazine of Automobile Club of Southern California), June 1933, pp. 14-15, 33-34. See also Theresa Colwes, "The Man Behind the Cuyama Valley Indian Massacre," The Californians, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1995),

- pp. 29-35.
2. Marie Harrington, On the Trail of Forgotten People: A Personal Account of the Life and Career of Mark Raymond Harrington (Reno: Great Basin Press, 1985), pp. 285, 289.
3. F.F. Latta, "Alexis Godey in Kern County," Fifth Annual Publication, Kern County Historical Society, November 1939, p. 42.
4. Ibid., p. 42.
5. Ibid., p. 44.
6. Ibid., p. 43.
7. Bill Gilbert, Westering Man: The Life of Joseph Walker (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), p. 279; Jeffrey Glover, "Alexis Godey: Forgotten Frontiersman," Historic Kern Quarterly Bulletin, Kern County Historical Society, September 1995.
8. Donald Jackson and Mary Lee Spence (Ed.), The Expeditions of John Charles Fremont, Vol. I, Travels from 1838 to 1844 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 457, note 27.
9. Ibid., pp. 679-680.
10. Dan L. Thrapp, Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1988), Vol. II, p. 567.
11. Feroi Egan, Fremont: Explorer for a Restless Nation (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co., 1977), pp. 327-329; Neal Harlow, California Conquered: War and Peace on the Pacific, 1846-1850 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 77. A recent, excellent account of Fremont's activities in California, 1844, 1846-47 is Tom Chaffin, Pathfinder: John Charles Fremont and the Course of American Empire (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), pp. 209-381.
12. John C. Fremont, Memoirs of My Life, Vol. I (Chicago and New York: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887), p. 491. (Vol. II was never published.)
13. Harlow, pp. 362-365.
14. Harlow, p. 181; Dwight L. Clark, Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), pp. 191-192; Glover, pp. 2-03.
15. Glover, p. 3.
16. Egan, pp. 443-463.
17. Ibid., pp. 465-477. There are several good accounts of Fremont's disastrous Fourth Expedition. Three of the best are William Brandon, The Men and the Mountain: Fremont's Fourth Expedition (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1955); Patricia Richmond, Trail to Disaster (Niwt, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1990); and Leroy and Ann Hafen, Fremont's Fourth Expedition, A Documentary Account of the Disaster of 1848-1849 (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1960).
- All of them cover in detail Godey's heroic rescue of the survivors.
18. Egan, pp. 312, 428, 483, 488-489, 519.
19. Thrapp, II, p. 567.
20. George Harwood Phillips, Bringing Them Under Subjection: California's Tejon Indian Reservation and Beyond 1852-1864 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 47-48.
21. R.S. Williamson, Pacific Railroad Surveys, Vol. V (Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, Printer, 1856), pp. 13-20; Walt Wheelock, "Alexis Godey," Branding Iron, Los Angeles Corral of Westerners, June 1965, p. 4.
22. The adventurous life of Edward Fitzgerald Ald Beale is covered somewhat eulogistically by Stephen Bonsal, Edward Fitzgerald Beale: Pioneer in the Path of Empire (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), and in a more scholarly manner by two recent biographies: Gerald Thompson, Edward F. Beale and the American West (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), and Carl Briggs and Clyde Francis Trydell, Quarterdeck and Saddlehorn: The Story of Edward F. Beale (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1983).
23. Phillips, p. 117.
24. Latta, "Alexis Godey in Kern County," pp. 34-35.
25. Barbara G. Gray, "The Story of San Emigdio Rancho," Historic Kern, September 1957, p. 2.
26. Latta, "Alexis Godey in Kern County," pp. 41, 43, 59.
27. Latta, Saga of Rancho El Tejon (Santa Cruz: Bear State Books, 1976), p. 233.
28. Thompson, pp. 151-153.
29. Latta, Saga of Rancho El Tejon, pp. 147-149.
30. Latta, "Alexis Godey in Kern County," pp. 38-39.
31. Ibid., p. 39.
32. Latta, Saga of Rancho El Tejon, pp. 153, 155.
33. Glover, p. 4.
34. Ibid.
35. Harrington, p. 21; Colwes, pp. 32-33.
36. Campbell Grant, "Interior Chumash," Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 8, California, Robert F. Heizer, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), pp. 530-534. In a recent communication, the curator of the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum informed this writer that he had no knowledge of a mass grave in the Cuyama Valley and that he had never heard of Harrington's tale of mass murder.