JUAN FLACO'S RIDE.

AN INCIDENT IN THE CONQUEST OF CALIFORNIA.

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Throughout the centuries of the evolution of the human race from barbarism to civilization the horse has been, both in peace and in war, the ally of man. The monument built to honor some military hero might often be dedicated as well to the horse he rode; for the victories won may have been due as much to the prowess of the steed as to the bravery of the rider.

"And when their statues are placed on high,
Under the dome of the Union sky—
The American soldiers' Temple of Fame—
There with the glorious General's name
Be it said in letters both bold and bright:
'Here is the steed that saved the day
By carrying Sheridan into the fight,
From Winchester—twenty miles away'."

Historians have lauded the prowess of the war horse and poets from Job to Buchanan Reed have sung his praises.

Before the days of the telegraph he alone was the swift-footed messenger that bore away from the battle fields the tidings of victory or defeat, and when a beleaguered army was beset on all sides by an enemy the hope of deliverance rested in the speed of some fleet-footed horse and the endurance of his rider.

In the story of the conquest of California by the Americans in 1846 is the brief mention of one of the most daring rides and most wonderful feats of human endurance recorded in history.

It is ride of Juan Flaco from Los Angeles to San Francisco—six hundred miles in four days.

For a better understanding of the necessity that impelled him to make his wonderful ride a brief review of the military situation at Los Angeles is necessary.

On the 7th of July, 1846, Commodore Sloat, in command of the Pacific fleet, raised the American flag on the custom house at Monterey and took possession of California in the name of the United States. The northern and central portions of the territory submitted without a show of resistance, but Pio Pico, the governor, and Juan

Castro, the military *comandante,* still maintained a form of government at Los Angeles, the capital, and were marshaling their forces to resist invasion.

Commodore Sloat resigned a few days after taking possession of California and was succeeded by Commodore Stockton. He set about organizing an expedition to complete the conquest. Captain Fremont, with his band of explorers recruited to 150 men, was sent by sailing vessel to San Diego, there to secure horses, and, with his battalion mounted, to form a junction with Stockton's forces for the subjugation of Los Angeles. On the 6th of August, Stockton with a force of three hundred and sixty sailors and marines landed at San Pedro. These were drilled in military movements on land and prepared for the march to Los Angeles, twenty-five miles distant.

On the 13th of August the forces of Stockton and Fremont united just south of Los Angeles and entered the city without resistance. Gen. Castro, at the approach of the Americans, had disbanded his army and with a few of his leading officers left for Sonora by the Pass of San Gorgonia and the Colorado desert; Pio Pico, the governor, fled southward, eventually reaching Lower California.

After remaining about two weeks in the capital, Commodore Stockton, considering the conquest of California completed; with his sailors and marines sailed for San Francisco, and Fremont with his battalion a few days later took up his line of march for Monterey. Captain Archibald Gillespie with a garrison of fifty men detached from Fremont's battalion was left to hold Los Angeles and keep the turbulent element of that hotbed of revolutions in subjection; and in accordance with the instructions of the secretary of war "to encourage neutrality, self-government and friendship."

Captain Gillespie was not a success in controlling the revolutionary element of the capital city, nor did he succeed in encouraging friendship. Historians have accused him of attempting to transform the ease-loving Californians into straight-laced Puritans by military regulations. Whether his attempt "by a coercive system to effect a moral and social change in the habits, diversions and pastimes of the people" was the cause or whether it was a patriotic impulse to free themselves from the rule of a nation foreign to them in customs and religion it is not necessary to our subject here to discuss.

The 15th of September is the national holiday of Mexico. In the olden time in California it was celebrated by festivities that might last for a week. Gillespie's quarters were in the government house which stood within a corral surrounded by an adobe wall. On the night of the 22nd of September a number of Californians and Sonorians filled with patriotism and perhaps with

wine made an attack on Gillespie's garrison. A desultory battle raged throughout the night, the Americans firing from behind the adobe wall, and the Californians from any cover they could obtain. Gillespie claimed to have beaten back his assailants "without loss to ourselves, killing and wounding three of their number." The next day he sent out Lieutenant Hensley with a squad of soldiers and arrested a number of the leading citizens and confined them in his quarters as hostages.

In less than twenty-four hours Gillespie had a full-fledged Mexican revolution on his hands. Castro's disbanded soldiers rallied at their old camp on the Paredon Blanco (White Bluff). From this camp on the 24th of September was issued the famous Pronunciamento de Varela y ostros Californians contra Los Americanos (The Proclamation of Varela and other Californians against the Americans.) It was signed by Serbulo Varela, Leonardo Cota and over three hundred others. It was intended to fire the Californian heart and arouse his latent patriotism. In firey invective and fierce denunciation it is the equal of Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death." Its recital of wrongs inflicted by the Americans is as grievous as are those charged to George III in our own Declaration of Independence.

Jose Maria Flores, a paroled Mexican officer, was placed in command of the insurgents. Gillespie, finding his quarters in the government house could not be defended, moved his small force to the top of a steep hill that overlooks the town from the west. He took with him three old iron cannon that had been abandoned by Castro. These placed on *carretas* (wooden-wheeled carts) were dragged up a steep ravine and mounted on commanding positions. He had hammered out from lead pipes found in a distillery cannon balls and grape shot and with home-made cartridges for his artillery he prepared for defense. Flores' soldiers numbering six to one of Gillespie's men formed a picket line around the hill and began a siege of the Americans. The Californians had one fine brass cannon, but on account of the elevation could not make effective use of it.

There was but little firing between the combatants, an occasional volley by the Californians and desultory shots from the Americans when the enemy approached too near. The Californians were well mounted but poorly armed, their weapons being principally short-range muskets, shot guns, lances and riatas, while the Americans were armed with long-range rifles of which the Californians had a wholesome dread. The fear of these arms and his cannon doubtless saved Gillespie and his men from capture and possibly massacre.

The situation of the Americans was indeed desperate. They were

surrounded by an overwhelming force, their supplies cut off and the nearest post from which they could receive assistance was San Francisco, and the country between in the hands of the enemy. To carry a message to Commodore Stockton 600 miles away, through the enemy's country was an undertaking that the bravest shrank from.

It was at this emergency that Juan Flaco volunteered to undertake the perilous feat. Captain Gillespie thus narrates the occurrence: "On the evening of the 24th of September a little before sunset Juan Flaco (called so by the country people in consequence of his exceeding leanness; and famous for the feats of express riding he had performed—his real name is John Brown), presented himself to me in the garrison and volunteered to take a dispatch to San Francisco for Commodore Stockton 600 miles distant."

"Knowing how closely we were besieged I considered the undertaking fraught with great danger. He persisted in going and I gave him several packages of paper cigaretts. On the inside of each cigar paper of one package I wrote "Believe the bearer" and affixed my seal which was known to my friends."

Flaco started at 8 P. M. on a fleet horse, "and with nothing but his riata (lasso) for his support and hope of relays of horses." Pretending to be a deserter from the garrison, he attempted to make his way through the enemy's lines, but his true character being suspected he was pursued by a squad of fifteen Californians. A hot race ensued. Finding the enemy gaining on him he forced his horse to leap a wide ravine. A shot from one of his pursuers mortally wounded his horse which after running some distance fell dead. Flaco carrying his spurs and riata made his way on foot to the rancho of an American living in the Santa Monica mountains; there he obtained another mount and again started on his long journey.

At 11 P. M. of the 25th he reached Santa Barbara. On giving one of his talismanic cigarettes to Lieutenant Talbott, who with a small force was holding that town, he was furnished with a fresh horse. After leaving Santa Barbara he was chased by a squad of the enemy's lancers. He rode his horse to death to escape his pursuers, but before it fell to rise no more he reached the rancho of Captain Robins, where he obtained a fresh mount. Late the evening of the 26th he arrived at the rancho of Louis Burton, where he procured a fresh horse. The next night he arrived at Monterey. Here he was given refreshments and allowed a short time to sleep. He was furnished a race horse by Captain Maddox and was off on the last stage of his long ride. He reached San Francisco at 8 P. M. of the 28th, having ridden 600 miles in four days. He slept on the

beach that night and next morning when the Commodore's boat landed he gave his message to Stockton.

Colton, who was the Alcalde of Monterey at that time notes Flaco's arrival there and says in his "Three Years in California" that he (Brown) "rode the whole distance from Los Angeles to Monterey, 460 miles, in fifty-two hours, during which time he had not slept. His intelligence was for Commodore Stockton, and in the nature of the case was not committed to paper, except a few words rolled in a cigar fastened in his hair. But the Commodore had sailed for San Francisco and it was necessary he should go 140 miles further. He was quite exhausted and was allowed to sleep three hours. Before day he was up and away on his journey."

Colton and Gillespie both made the distance from Los Angeles to San Francisco 600 miles. The actual distance by the coast route —the one taken by Flaco—is about 500 miles. Counting the detours Flaco made from the direct road to avoid hostile parties of Californians and the deviation from the trail to procure fresh horses he doubtless rode 600 miles.

The trail over which Flaco made his wonderful ride was not like the road from Winchester town, "a good broad highway leading down." It was what the Spaniards call a camino de herradura—a bridle path—now winding up through rocky cañons, skirting along the edge of precipitous cliffs, then zigzagging down the step sides of the chaparral-covered mountains, now over the sands of the sea beach and again across long stretches of brown mesa; winding through narrow valleys and across rolling foothills, a trail as nature made it, unchanged by the hand of man—such was the highway over which Flaco's steeds "stretched away with utmost speed."

Take it all in all, Flaco's ride has no parallel in history for speed, distance and endurance. To paraphrase Whittier's "Skipper Ireson's Ride"—

"Of all the rides since the birth of time,
Told in story or sung in rhyme,
The *fleetest* ride that ever was sped"
Was Juan Flaco's ride from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

Longfellow has immortalized the ride of Paul Revere, Robert Browning tells in beautiful verse of the riders who brought the good news from Ghent to Aix, and Buchanan Read thrills us with the heroic measures of Sheridan's Ride. No poet has sung of Juan Flaco's wonderful ride fleeter, longer and more perilous than any of these. Flaco rode 600 miles over mountain and plain through an enemy's country to bring aid to a besieged garrison, while Revere and Sheridan were in the country of their friends or protected by an army in front.

Once entered on his perilous ride there was no stop, no stay for Flaco. To halt for rest might bring his pursuers upon him and capture meant an ignominious death at the end of a riata. To push on might be to ride into his enemies in front. To the fleetness of his steeds and to his intimate knowledge of the country Flaco owed his escape from capture and death.

It is disappointing to know that Flaco's perilous ride was made in vain. On the receipt of his message Commodore Stockton set about sending relief immediately. Captain William Mervine, commanding the frigate Savannah, was ordered to prepare to go to sea at once. The vessel set sail and ran down the bay with a fine breeze. "The Captain," says Gillespie, "happening to think of some frivolous thing he wanted from Sausalito, cast anchor and went ashore. Before he was ready to sail again, a dense fog set in and detained the vessel three days."

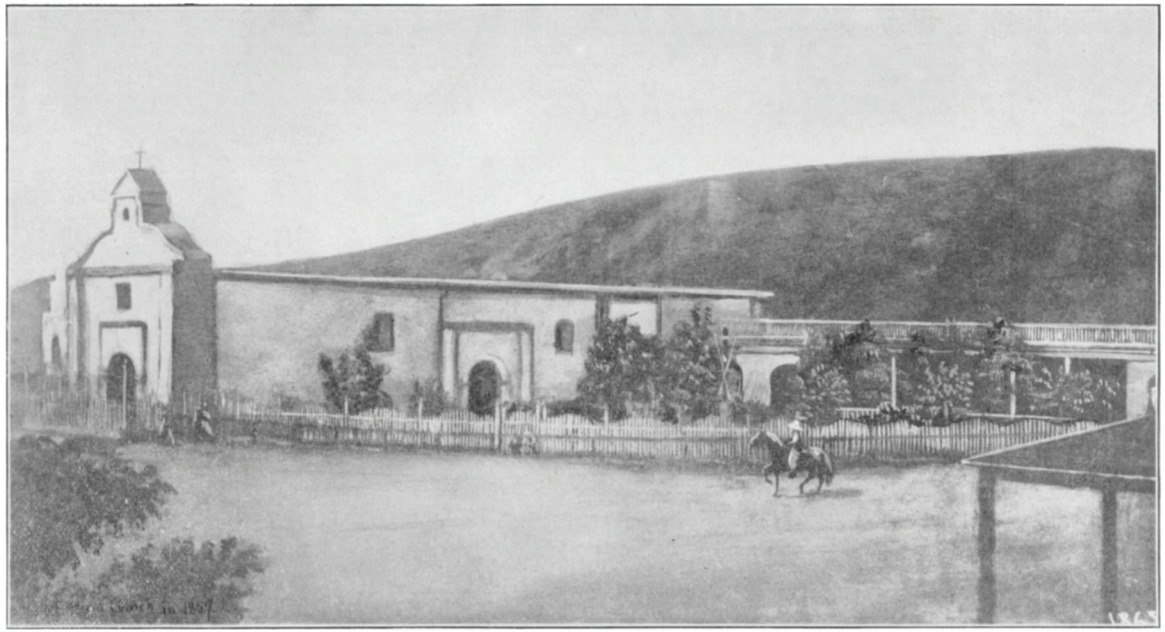
In the meantime Gillespie's men were bravely holding the hill, but were worn out with constantly watching and guarding against an assault.

The obstinate resistance of the Americans enraged the Californians. If Gillespie continued to hold the town his obstinacy might bring down their vengeance not only upon him and his men but upon many of the American residents of the south who had become Mexican citizens by naturalization, but who sympathized with the Americans and favored them whenever an opportunity offered.

Finally, General Flores, after several attempts to negotiate terms of surrender issued his ultimatum to Captain Gillespie—evacuate the town within twenty-four hours, march to San Pedro, there to take ship and leave the country, or risk the consequences of an onslaught which might result in the massacre of the garrison. Gillespie fearing that Flaco had been killed or captured, and despairing of assistance, his supplies exhausted and his men worn out by seven days and nights of constant guarding against attack, accepted the terms of capitulation offered by Flores.

On the 30th of September he and his riflemen marched out of the town with all the honors of war, drums beating, colors flying and two of the old iron cannons mounted on the axle-trees of Mexican carts and drawn by oxen. They arrived at San Pedro without molestation and camped there till the 3rd of October, when Flores having cut off their supply of water they were forced to embark on the merchant ship Vandalia, which Gillespie had detained to cover his retreat. Gillespie before going aboard spiked the cannon he had brought with him and rolled them into the bay.

On the 7th of October (1846) Captain Mervine in command of the man-of-war Savannah arrived in the bay of San Pedro and on



FORT HILL—Where Captain Gillespie was beseiged and from which Juan Flaco began his perilous ride.

THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS—As it appeared in 1846. The church was remodeled in 1861. A shingled roof was substituted for the flat asphalum roof shown in the picture. Fort Moore, constructed in 1847, was located on the top of the hill directly back of the church.

the morning of the 8th the combined forces of Mervine and Gillespie numbering 300 men landed at San Pedro and took up their line of march to capture the rebellious Pueblo. Mervine had neither cavalry nor artillery. At Dominguez rancho, fifteen miles from Los Angeles he encountered a body of the enemy's cavalry numbering about 120 men. The Americans bivouacked and prepared for battle. The Californians were commanded by Jose Antonio Carrillo, one of their ablest officers. During the night they received reinforcements of forty men with one piece of artillery. Hostilities began on the morning of the 9th with a shot from the cannon. Mervine formed his men in a hollow square to resist a cavalry charge and advanced upon the enemy. The riflemen made repeated sallies to capture the cannon, but failed. The Californians with their gun loaded would await the approach of the column and when it was within easy range fire. If the ball missed a man in the front rank of the square it might strike one in the rear.

The gun discharged, the Californians with one end of their riatas fastened to the pole and axle-trees of the gun carriage and the other twisted around their saddle-bows would gallop away with their cannon to a convenient distance, load and await the advance of the column, fire and again fall back. After a running fight of several miles Mervine finding that he was losing men and inflicting no injury on the enemy, ordered a retreat. The Californians, after giving him a parting shot retreated to Los Angeles and the singular spectacle was witnessed in this anomalous battle of both victor and vanquished in full retreat at the same time.

Never before or since in American warfare was a victory won with such crude armament. The principal weapons of the Californians were home-made lances the blades beaten out of files and rasps by a blacksmith and inserted in the ends of willow poles eight feet long. A few horse pistols, flint-lock muskets, shot guns and blunderbusses completed their motley collection of arms.

The piece of artillery that did such deadly excution on the Americans was the famous "Old Woman's gun." It was a bronze four-pounder that for a number of years had stood on the plaza in front of the parish church of Los Angeles and was used for firing salutes on feast days and other public occasions. When, on the approach of Stockton's and Fremont's forces, Castro abandoned his artillery and fled, an old lady, Dona Clara Cota de Reyes, declared the Gringos (Americans) should not have the church's gun. So with the assistance of her daughter she buried it in a cane patch near her residence. When the Californians revolted against Gillespie's rule they unearthed the gun and used it against him.

Before the battle of Dominguez the old gun had been mounted on

the forward axletree of a Jersey wagon that had crossed the plains the year before. It was lashed in place by rawhide thongs and drawn by means of riatas as described above. The range was obtained by raising or lowering the pole. The gunner having neither lanyard nor pent-stock to fire it, touched it off with the lighted end of a cigarette. The cannon balls had been beaten out of scrap iron by a blacksmith, and the powder used in the gun was made at San Gabriel. When Mervine gave the order to retreat the Californians had the last shot in their locker in their gun. Had Mervine known this he could have pushed on and captured the city. The Californians with their crude arms could not have resisted the American rifles.

Mervine retreated to San Pedro carrying with him his dead and wounded. There were five killed and eight or ten wounded. The dead were buried on the Isle de Los Muertos—The Isle of the Dead, a solitary island in San Pedro bay, now called Dead Man's Island.

After the recapture of Los Angeles by Commodore Stockton and General Kearny, January 10, 1847, earthworks were constructed on the hill where Gillespie's riflemen stood siege. The redoubt was named Fort Moore, after Captain B. D. Moore of the First U. S. Dragoons, killed at the battle of San Pasqual. The earthworks have long since disappeared, but the hill, now thickly built over with residences is still known as Fort Hill. Two thousand students daily climb the hill to the halls of the High school that fronts the site of the old fort from whose bastions long ago cannon frowned on the conquered town, but the story of Gillespie's brave defense and Juan Flaco's perilous ride are tales untold in their histories.

Juan Flaco returned with Mervine and took part in the disastrous battle of Dominguez, and in all of the subsequent battles of the conquest—San Pasqual, Paso de Bartolo and La Mesa.

He was born at Calrescrom, Sweden, in 1799. He left his native country at the age of fifteen and enlisted as a cabin-boy in the English navy. He was a soldier of fortune and sometimes of misfortune. He drifted down to South America at the time the South American states were engaged in a death struggle to free themselves from the domination of Spain, and enlisted under the banner of General Simon Bolivar. He took part in most of the battles in which that patriot general was engaged. He was taken prisoner by the Spaniards and was sentenced to be shot—a common method of disposing of prisoners in the internecine wars of that country. He made his escape and eventually reached California.

He took part in the revolution of 1836, when the Mexican governor Guitierrez was deposed by Alvarado and California declared

independent of Mexico. He served under Governor Micheltorena in the revolution of 1845, and was present at the battle of the Alamo, where that governor was defeated by Pico and Castro and driven out of the territory. He enlisted in Fremont's battalion and served in it until it was mustered out of the service.

Juan Flaco never received any compensation for his perilous ride. It was but one of the many brave deeds unhonored and unsung of the daring pioneers, who explored and conquered the far west.

He died at Stockton, December 10, 1859. John Brown, but generally known and called by his California nick-name Juan Flaco (Lean John) was a man of strict integrity, of a social disposition and generous impulses. He died in very straitened circumstances.