

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

RESIDENCE of GENERAL WILLIAM B. IDE

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by

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winter of 1844-1845, he began to make preparations for an overland journey. With his family, he joined a large company of emigrants bound for the West. At Fort Hall, they separated, some of the party going to Oregon. William B. Ide headed a group to California. The Grigsby-Ide party arrived at Sutter's Fort October 25, 1845, after a hard journey over the Sierras.²

The immigrants camped near Sutter's Fort for a few days. There Ide met Peter Lassen, who suggested that for the winter Ide and his family occupy a cabin on the Lassen rancho, 130 miles north of Sutter's Fort, on Deer Creek, and build a saw-mill there. Ide had brought west with him a circular saw and some mill irons. He accepted Lassen's invitation and moved onto the rancho. Shortly after that, Lassen arrived with the family of a compatriot of his, Mr. Danes, and asked Ide to give up the cabin. The Ides went seven miles north, to the H. R. Thomes ranch, near the Sacramento River and camped for the winter.³

Another family, a Mr. Tusting and his wife, also were camped on the Thomes grant. They welcomed neighbors, and the two families agreed to live together during the

2. Кирков, William B. Ide, the president of California, 13-14.

3. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 688.

winter for companionship and protection against the Indians. Ide and Tusting built a log cabin, the first on the present site of Tehama. The winter was very cold and stormy and the party was isolated for several weeks, during which the countryside was badly flooded. Throughout the rainy season three other weather-bound men stayed at the cabin--Mr. Pitts, Mr. Boker, who took care of the Thomes livestock, and Josiah Belden, owner of a rancho north of the Thomes place.

Ide made an arrangement with Mr. Belden whereby, in return for staying on his ranch for three years and looking after the cattle and horses, Mr. Belden agreed to give Ide one-half of the grant. Ide and his family moved onto the Belden place in the spring. With the assistance of his sons, he built a log cabin on the river at a place called Red Bank. On April 1, the family moved in, although the house was only partly finished. They pastured sixty-five head of cattle on the place, which were all that were left of the livestock they had driven across the plains.⁴

Soon after Ide's arrival in California, rumors were circulated among the northern settlers that the Mexican authorities in California planned to drive out all the settlers north of Yerba Buena and burn their homes. It was said that General Castro was inciting the Indians, and that the latter waited only for the season when grain fields

4. Kirov, William B. Ide, 14-15.

would be combustible, to burn them. A proclamation had been issued warning all settlers to leave at once.

News of the mobilization of troops, in the south by Castro - really an action against his adversary, Pío Pico - was interpreted by some to mean an attack on the settlers, many of whom believed themselves in imminent danger. The result was the Bear Flag revolt in the middle of June, 1846. This episode was instigated by filibusters, with Frémont as the ringleader, and participated in by others who honestly believed themselves and their families endangered. In its short duration, William Ide came into prominence in California History as one of the leaders of the movement and as the president of the California Republic.⁵

Ide was one of the recent settlers in California at the time of the Bear Flag uprising, having come overland the previous fall. The antagonism of the Mexican authorities to American settlers was among the first news which many of the travel-worn immigrants heard when they crossed the Sierras. When rumors of hostile activities by the Californians became more prevalent and it was circulated that Castro had left Monterey with soldiers to drive out the

5. See J. A. Hussey, "The Bear Flag Monument," in the California Historical Landmarks Series, for a full discussion of the Bear Flag revolt.

Americans, some of the northern settlers gathered and made plans for the protection of their families and the homes which they had endured so many hardships to reach.

Ide was one of those who at once joined in the movement. While some of the participants were unscrupulous in their motives, Ide is generally conceded to have been honest in his actions and belief, although he overestimated his own importance in the affair. Bancroft says of Ide in this connection:⁶

In June '46 he joined the Bear party being apparently one of the few settlers who acted in good faith and was induced to believe the false reports that the Americans were in danger. After the occupation of Sonoma and the departure of Captain Grigsby, Ide was chosen commandant of the Bears, and held that position until the reorganization of the forces under Fremont in July, just before the cause was merged in that of the U. S.....

Henry L. Ford, who had heard the rumor that General Castro was on his way north from Monterey to drive out the Americans, hastily rode from rancho to rancho, spreading a warning. A small group of anxious settlers, at first only eleven in number, met to consider what action to take. They rode over to seek the advice and aid of Captain Fremont who with a number of trappers was camped near the Marysville Buttes. Fremont refused

⁶. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 688-689.

any assistance, or to allow Kit Carson and several other of his men to join the insurgents.

Other settlers soon joined the rebels. The first offensive movement was made by them on June 10, 1846, under the leadership of Ezekiel Merritt. Having heard that Castro had sent General Alviso to Sonoma for two hundred horses to be driven to Monterey, the settlers supposed that Castro intended to use them in attack. They determined to capture the horses, and were successful in their plan. On the Consumnes River, they captured Alviso and eight or ten men with the horses. Later the men were released but the horses were left with Frémont.⁷

The group of insurgents soon increased to thirty-three. Their next move was a drastic one. Unaided by Frémont, they determined to capture Sonoma, the Mexican fort in Northern California commanded by General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. At dawn on June 14, they arrived at Sonoma, surprised the garrison and made prisoners of the general, his brother, Captain Salvador Vallejo, Lieutenant Prudon and eighteen soldiers.

When asked under whose authority they acted, the settlers were at a loss to reply, for they had no definitely

7. P. B. Bekeart, "The Bear Flag in California," Society of California Pioneers Quarterly, VI, 23-25.

planned action or chosen leader although Ezekiel Merritt had acted as captain in the capture of the horses and the fort. Vallejo, who assumed that the settlers acted under Frémont's orders, submitted to arrest and entered into negotiations with them. Robert Semple, William Knight and Ezekiel Merritt were delegated to draw up the necessary documents. After Jacob P. Leese was sent for, to act as interpreter, since most of the men could not speak Spanish well if at all, negotiations proceeded more smoothly.⁸

Although accounts of subsequent events are contradictory, it seems that the warm hospitality of the captive General Vallejo was directly responsible for William Ide's rise to the position as a leader of the Bear Flag revolt. During the course of the negotiations, the general hospitably served his visitors with his choice wines and brandy. According to accounts of participants in the episode, the group became quite merry, and neglected to carry out, immediately, the business at hand. Meanwhile, the other insurgents outside waited in vain for their leaders to return. After hours had passed they elected John Grigsby to go in and see what had happened. Again, after some time had elapsed and no one appeared, they sent in William B. Ide to find out the reason for the delay. According to Ide, an

8. Bancroft, History of California, V, 113-114.

overindulgence in the brandy and wines which the general had served had rendered the chosen leaders and their prisoners incapable of much progress in their negotiations. Describing the scene which he had encountered, he says:⁹

The general's generous spirits gave proof of his usual hospitality, as the richest wines and brandies sparkled in the glasses, and those who had thus unceremoniously met soon became merry companions; more especially, the merry visitors. There sat Dr. S., just modifying a long string of articles of capitulation. There sat Merritt, his head fallen; there sat Knight no longer able to interpret, and there sat the new made captain as mute as the seat he sat upon. The bottles had well nigh vanquished the captors.

Other reports state that the liquor had its ill effect not so much on the leaders of the revolt as on the men who, while waiting outside, drank considerably and became unmanageable. In any event, disagreement among the insurgents followed. The leaders could not come to an agreement and their men would not ratify the capitulation which had been drawn up. Captain Grigsby resigned his place as leader of the revolt. At a meeting of the rebels, it was decided to send Vallejo and the other prisoners to Fort Sutter. William Ide was elected to replace Grigsby as captain. The state of affairs at that time was quite confused, as

9. Bancroft, History of California, V, 115.

Bancroft relates:¹⁰

The leaders differed in their ideas, not only respecting the disposition to be made of the prisoners, but about the chief object of the movement. Evidently there had been no definitely arranged plan of operations. Frémont had succeeded in bringing about a state of open hostility without committing himself. Some of the men regarded their movements as simply intended to provoke Castro to make an attack on Frémont; or at least they dreaded the responsibility of engaging in a regular revolution, especially when it was learned that no one could produce any definite promise from Frémont in black and white to support such a movement. Others were in favor of an immediate declaration of independence. That such differences of opinion did exist as Ide states, is in itself by no means improbable; and it is confirmed to some extent by the fact that Grigsby did resign his leadership, and by the somewhat strange circumstances that three such important men as Grigsby, Merritt and Semple, should have left Sonoma to accompany the prisoners.

Guarded by Grigsby, Semple, Merritt, Hargrave, Knight and several other men, General Vallejo and the other two prisoners were sent to Sutter's Fort on June 14. Twenty-four men remained at Sonoma, with William B. Ide in command.

10. Bancroft, History of California, V, 117-118.

After Captain Grigsby's resignation and in the absence of the other leaders, William Ide was in actual command of the revolt at Sonoma from June 14 until the arrival, on June 25, of Frémont, who then assumed the leadership of the forces. Whereas Ide seemed to regard himself as a kind of saviour who took control at a crucial moment when the other leaders only added to the confused state of things by their inability to agree on anything, Bancroft says that by his men Ide was regarded merely as a temporary commandant.¹¹

Ide soon came to regard himself as leader in a grand revolutionary movement, as the conqueror of Cal.; his men regarded him simply as temporary commandant at Sonoma, chosen to that position for his zeal in the cause and some educational advantages, and they were willing to indulge him in harmless eccentricities, paying but slight attention to his grandiloquent proclamations, or to his peculiar views of himself and the republic he thought he had founded. The assumption of the command by Frémont was regarded by Ide as a grievous wrong to himself.

Ide assumed his duties earnestly and during the period of his command at Sonoma several important events of the uprising transpired. Guards and sentinels were posted to keep a watch. Either on June 14 or the following

¹¹. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 689.

day, although the exact date is in doubt, the Bear Flag, emblem of the California Republic, was made and raised over Sonoma. Gathered in the plaza while the flag was hoisted, the insurgents proclaimed William B. Ide the president of the California Republic.¹²

The new commandant had many important details to superintend. Rules of discipline and order were drawn up. Plans for the feeding and care of the defenseless families brought within the jurisdiction of the revolt were made. With the aid of an interpreter, Ide spent much time explaining the rights of man and democratic government to the Californians who had been made prisoners. A proclamation stating the principles, plans and motives of the insurgents was written and several copies were made.¹³

On June 15, Ide sent a letter by William Todd, commander of the United States squadron at Sausalito giving the purpose of the Bear Flag revolt and requesting ammunition and aid..Todd returned on the 17th, without any powder. The Bears' request for ammunition was refused, but they were told where powder would be put on shore to dry. Overcoming the guard by a pretended

12. Kirov, William B. Ide, 21-23.

13. Bancroft, History of California, V, 145-157.

surprise, they secured the powder while the ship, as a matter of form, fired four guns in their direction.¹⁴

On the evening of June 16, Lieutenant Misroon, sent by Captain Montgomery of the Portsmouth, anchored at Sausalito, arrived at Sonoma. He was sent at the request of General Vallejo to insure the safety of the families and non-combatants at Sonoma. Misroon secured from Ide a copy of the proclamation he had issued, as well as a written pledge to prevent any violence to peaceful individuals or their property. Bancroft wrote of Misroon's report of what he found at Sonoma.¹⁵

Misroon finally left Sonoma at noon on the 17th. His report of the next day contained copies of the proclamation and pledge, a description of the flag, a statement that the garrison consisted of about twenty-five men, and an expression of his opinion that not only was there danger of outrages being committed, but that the Californians were very well contented with their position.

On June 19, the first blood was shed in the revolt. Two of the Bears, George Fowler and Thomas Cowie, were sent to the home of Dr. Bale in the Russian River country to get a barrel of powder which he had. On their

14. Bekeart, "The Bear Flag in California" in Society of California Pioneers, Quarterly, VI, 26.

15. Bancroft, History of California, V, 156-157.

journey they encountered a band of Californians commanded by Juan Padilla and Ramón Garrillo, who demanded that they surrender their arms and then brutally murdered them.

Ide sent Lieutenant Ford with nineteen men after the Californians. The Bears met them near San Rafael. Reinforced with men of Captain de la Torre's company, the Californians numbered seventy or eighty men. They made an offensive attack but were beaten back by the Bears and retreated after several of their men were killed and two wounded. Lieutenant Ford returned to Sonoma on June 24, having suffered no losses.¹⁶

In the meantime, having let events at Sonoma take their course under Ide's direction, Captain Frémont suddenly decided to give his assistance. When Vallejo and the two other Sonoma prisoners were escorted to Sacramento by the Bear leaders, they were taken to Frémont who refused their parole and made them prisoners at Sutter's Fort. On June 25, eleven days after the capture of Sonoma, Frémont, with seventy-four men, including his exploring party and some settlers, arrived at Sonoma and took the command of the Bear forces from Ide's hands.

Ide, who considered himself the head of the

16. Bekeart, "The Bear Flag in California" in Society of California Pioneers, Quarterly, VI, 26.

revolt, was disappointed by Fremont's usurpation of the command, which he considered a great injustice to himself. However, Bancroft says in this regard:¹⁷

The truth is that Ide greatly overrated his influence and achievements. He believed himself entitled to the glory of having organized a great revolution, won a great victory, and founded a great republic. His companions of the original Bear party looked on him as an honest, zealous, but eccentric and somewhat fanatical old man, whose zeal, good sense, and education rendered him as well fitted for the command as any of their number after the departure of Semple and Grigsby, and whose eccentricities and mania for theorizing and writing and making speeches could not be regarded as a serious fault on the part of a garrison commander. They cared nothing for his political theories, and never thought of him as in any sense a rival of Fremont. It was on the latter's cooperation that they had founded their hopes of successful revolt from the first, and they were ready to welcome his accession to the active command at any time, regarding it as practically an alliance with the United States. Sympathy is naturally excited in Ide's behalf by reason of his many good qualities, by his devotion to what seemed a worthy cause, by the earnestness with

17. Bancroft, History of California, V, 183-184.

which he presents his wrongs, and by the fact that Fremont did unquestionably rob him of a certain portion of what both parties and the world at large regarded as fame. But it must be born in mind that his cause was in reality a bad one--mere filibusterism; that his influence in promoting the revolt had been much less than Fremont; and that, far from having conquered California as he believed, he had really accomplished little or nothing toward that conquest. Moreover, it is not easy to comprehend that his plan of giving the country to the United States was in any way more honorable than that by which the annexation was effected, and which he so violently denounces.

After his relinquishment of the command, Ide continued to serve in the movement, under Fremont. On July 9, the Stars and Stripes replaced the Bear Flag at Sonoma and the California Republic was no more, as its cause was merged in that of the United States war with Mexico. During the war, Ide served as a private with the California Battalion, going south in their first expedition, which was commanded by Fremont.

After the war, Ide returned to his home on the Belden ranch where his family had resided during his absence. In 1847, he purchased the entire ranch, cattle, and other stock from Belden for 6,000 dollars. The place was known as the Rancho de la Barranca Colorada,

or Ranch of the Red Bluff, because of a nearby reddish colored cliff on the river. This grant was located south of the town which later became Red Bluff.

Ide purchased additional acreage north of the Rancho de la Barranca Colorado and the town of Red Bluff. In 1849, he built an adobe house on the river bank near the point where he established the Adobe Ferry. The ferry was operated for many years until the fall of 1876, when a bridge across the river was completed and the ferry was abandoned.¹⁸

The new adobe was the residence of the Ides for several years and during the time the general ran the ferry. It became a well known landmark to travelers who passed by along the famous old California-Oregon stage-coach road which ran in front of the house, and to the hordes of miners who crossed the Sacramento River on Ide's ferry on their way to and from the mines. When General Ide gained prominence for his part in the Bear Flag revolt and as the president of the California Republic, his residence became a place of considerable interest.

After the war, Ide took an important part in public life. In June, 1847, he was appointed surveyor

18. H. E. Rensch, Historic spots in California; valley Sierra counties, 477.

for the northern department by General Mason. During the gold rush he spent some time in mining. However, he soon gave that up, and after 1850 became active in the political affairs of Colusa County. Ide enjoyed public life and devoted himself whole-heartedly to the many irksome details of office.

After 1850, although his wife and children continued to make their home at the adobe on the Sacramento River bank, Ide resided most of the time at Monroeville, the seat of Colusa County, and later was elected county judge. In those days of mining excitement, it was difficult to find anyone who would give his personal time and energy to public duties. For a time during the shortage of men to occupy the county offices, Ide carried out the duties of several of them and served as judge, county clerk, auditor, treasurer, coroner and surveyor. He did his work well and was known and liked throughout the countryside.

General Ide died at Monroeville, December 20, 1852, at the age of fifty-six. He was buried on a knoll near the courthouse of Monroeville where he had spent the last years of his life in public service. Bancroft says of him:¹⁹

He retained to the end his fondness for long reports and

19. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 689.

for political theorizing, but with all his eccentricity-- he was always a most worthy and honest man, and had somewhat remarkable tact and executive ability in several directions.

The Ide adobe is typical of the houses erected by the early California pioneers. It is not large, but compact and well built. Modernized from time to time, it has been kept in good repair. The adobe walls are well preserved although some of the paint has worn off the bricks. There are windows on every side, and a brick fireplace creates a pleasant and cozy atmosphere within. Vines and rosebushes climb along the walls. A broad green lawn surrounds the house, which is shaded by fruit trees and a large California oak. Now the George E. Sutton place, the old adobe residence of the leader of the Bear Flag revolt and president of the California Republic, has been marked as an historic site.

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