

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

The Battle of Murphy's Corral

Just west of Hwy. 99 where it junctions with the Grant Line Road south of Elk Grove at the Consumnes River stands a California State Landmark Monument marking the site of the "Battle of Murphy's Corral," the beginning of the conquest of California by the United States on June 10, 1846.

This is where American settlers led by Ezekial Merritt overpowered Mexican soldiers under Lt. Fransioco Arce to capture their Mexican Army horses from the corral of the Murphy Rancho on the north bank of the Consumnes. These mounts were needed by the Americans in their campaign against Mexican General Vallejo at Sonoma on June 14, 1846, in the "Bear Flag Revolt."

The Mexicans under Lt. Arce (12 men total) had been detailed by Vallejo to herd a remuda of 170 horses from Sonoma to Santa Clara to furnish mounts for General Castro's forces. No blood was shed in this skirmish. Following their humiliating defeat, the Mexicans were allowed to retain their personal mounts and return home.

Murphy's Rancho was the home of Martin Murphy Jr. who had purchased the land and settled there immediately after his family arrived in the Sacramento Valley during the spring of 1845. There is no evidence of his involvement in the "battle" at his corral.

Who was this Martin Murphy Jr. and where had he come from? He was a native of Ireland, born in 1807, who, after emigrating first to Canada, came to America in 1842 to settle in western Missouri adjacent to the farm of his father, Martin Sr. Here an epidemic of malaria took a heavy family toll. The remainder of the clan sold their properties to join an Oregon-bound wagon train in the spring of 1844.

The California-bound portion of this train numbered 51 men, women and children, including 26 Murphy family members. They accompanied the Oregon-bound wagons as far as Fort Hall (Idaho) where luckily they met an experienced 80-year-old Mountain Man, Caleb Greenwood, who, with his two half-Indian sons, agreed to guide them to California.

This group of emigrants became known in history as the Stevens-Murphy Party. They followed early trappers' routes and the tracks of the 1843 Chiles-Walker Party and successfully followed the Marys River (Humboldt,) reaching the sink in western Nevada on October 1, after the first snowfall. This marked the end of Old Greenwood's western trail knowledge. At the sink Greenwood acquired the valuable services of a Paiute Indian named Truckee who guided them across the 40-mile desert to the river and canyon that bears his name today.

The party followed the river with difficulty as far as a body of water that was later to become Donner Lake, arriving on November 15. Where the Truckee River turns suddenly to the south the party split. It was determined that six members - four men and two women on horseback - would follow the river south. Three Murphys were in this contingent. This small group soon sighted a vast mountain lake later known as Lake Bigler and, even later, Lake Tahoe. They turned sharply west from this lake, crossed the Sierra summit to follow ridges downward, eventually reaching the Rubicon River that they pursued to the Middle Fork of the American River that led them all the way to Sutter's Fort. They arrived there on December 1, 1844.

Meanwhile the balance of the party still at Donner Lake spent several days endeavoring to locate a pass through the Sierra crest. Then between November 20 and 25 they pushed on with five wagons (the rest were to be picked up later) and ascended the granite wall known today as "Donner Summit." Thus the Stephens-Murphy Party is credited with being the first wagon train to conquer the Sierra crest.

Three young men volunteered to remain behind at the lake to guard the wagons and supplies. Ultimately only one - Moses Schallenberger, a lad of 17 - suffered alone through the bitter winter until his rescue in the spring. His story is an epic of survival.

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The wagon train members made their way with great difficulty down to the Yuba River as far as today's Big Bend. Here, just off the present-day I-80, heavy snows on November 28 forced them to make camp. After building shelters for the women and children around the wagons Martin Murphy Jr. and 17 other men struggled through the western slope as far as Sutter' Fort. They arrived on December 13, 1844.

Here the men were almost immediately conscripted into the American ranks about to leave for southern California in the Mexican "War," thanks to Captain Sutter. This interruption delayed their return to the Yuba to rescue their families until March, 1845. The women and children barely survived a long bitter winter. Some of them nearly starved. At their campsite Martin Jr. discovered that he had a newborn infant daughter, the first non-hispanic child born in California, excluding Indians.

Once safely in the valley, members of the wagon train scattered. Martin Murphy Sr. settled in the Santa Clara Valley. Martin Jr. purchased two square leagues of land only 18 miles south of Sutter's, on the Consumnes River (17,600 acres, for which he paid \$250.00 or 14¢ per acre.) Here he established "Murphy's Rancho" where he settled his family and raised wheat and cattle.

In 1850 he moved to the Santa Clara Valley and sold half of his rancho with 3,000 head of cattle for \$50,000.00. It can be readily seen why he never saw the need to look for gold.

In the Santa Clara Valley Martin Jr. accumulated vast land holdings in California, as far south as San Luis Obispo. He is remembered today as founder of the city of Sunnyvale. He and his Irish bride, Mary Bolger, built a 20-room home on 4,000 acres for which he paid \$5.00 per acre. This homesite is now a city park.

In his later years Martin Jr. was considered to be "one of the richest and largest landowners in the U. S." At the time of their 50th wedding anniversary celebration in 1881 the Murphys extended a general invitation to the public through the press. From both San Francisco and San Jose special trains chartered by the family ran all day. Preparations were made to serve 3,000 guests. By noon over 4,000 had arrived. At close of day more than 7,000 guests had paid homage to the couple.

Martin Jr. was a principal benefactor of the University of Santa Clara. Though he never learned to read or write his own name he was universally respected for his honesty, generosity and fair dealings.

The Murphys moved into San Jose in 1882 where they divided all their assets equally among their heirs. When Martin Jr. died in 1884 at age 77 his holdings were estimated to be worth five million dollars.

This story illustrates what fate had in store for some of the early emigrants to California. Martin Jr. survived the arduous trek over dry plains and lofty mountains to discover, indeed, his "land of opportunity." He did it without panning a single ounce of gold.