Our Own Civil War

Who We Were

As the nation commemorates the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, Californians needn’t feel left out. Yes, other states like Virginia, Pennsylvania and the Carolinas provided the front lines of the greatest rupture in American history — but California nonetheless played an important role in the run-up to the war.

There is a tendency to assume that California barely existed, and hardly mattered, in antebellum days. But it was the question of the West — most notably whether the new western states and territories gained from the recent war with Mexico would have slavery — that pushed the county into the breach in 1861. Years earlier, the Compromise of 1850 brought California into the nation as a state; that landmark legislation placated both North and South, — sort of– and prolonged a rickety peace for another decade. The compromise allowed California to enter the union as a free state, thus tipping the balance in favor of non-slave states, 16 to 15. In return, the South received much more punch in the pursuit of runaway slaves, among other neds to the region.

California even had its own sectional crisis, an early manifestation of what has become, a century and a half later, a chestnut of California political culture: the oft-repeated notion that the state ought to be cut in half.

For this story, we must visit Southern California, and Los Angeles in particular, in the 1850s. Violent and chaotic, the region suffered from the hangover of the recent and brutal war with Mexico and seemed to look to the coming war between the states with relish. Although eclipsed in population by Northern California cities in the wake of the Gold Rush, Los Angeles remained the biggest town in Southern California with a population of nearly 5,000 and continued to have a large Mexican presence. Most American migrants into the region in the 1850s came from slave states. That demographic alchemy of Southerners and Mexicans created all kinds of economic, cultural, social and religious tensions. Not only was the war with Mexico a very recent memory, the coming war suggested a furtherance of trouble. Mexicans in Los Angeles generally (though not universally) shared their mother country’s opposition to slavery. Southerners new to Los Angeles, on the other hand, imagined that slavery could do very well in the Southland and ought to be encouraged to migrate west.

So it is rather surprising that the 1859 attempt to cleave California roughly at the Tehachapi Mountains, which would cut lose the six southernmost counties in the state, originated from an alliance of elite Anglo Southerners and elite Mexican landowners in Southern California. Southerners and Mexican (now Mexican American) elites supported separation for different but related reasons. While transplanted Southerners had hopes of creating a new slave state, land-rich Californios—a term which denoted California birth as well as economic and cultural status—wanted to escape a discriminatory tax system that taxed land but not mining profits garnered from the mineral rich northern parts of the state. Feeling besieged by higher taxes, cumbersome new requirements for validating land titles, and the unrelenting threat of squatters, Californios across the state were fast losing their land, and many in Southern California looked to secession as a means to staunch the bleeding.

Behind these two particular, if not contradictory, interests was a shared conservatism and a common desire to strengthen a hierarchical social order. The leaders of both groups valued land ownership, masculine honor, female virtue, and their positions atop patriarchal families and social hierarchies of race and class. Those positions could best be upheld, they believed, by the importation and validation of slavery or by propping up a hacienda system made rickety by regime change, drought, and differential taxation practices north to south. Accordingly, as the nation moved with fated velocity towards the election of Lincoln, secession, Sumter, and Bull Run, pro-Southern and Californio leaders in the far West joined forces in the Chivalry (or “Chiv”) faction of the Democratic Party.

Southerner Joseph Lancaster Brent and Californio Andrés Pico (the brother of California’s last Mexican-era governor, Pío Pico, for whom a major L.A. east-west boulevard artery is named) were important leaders of Los Angeles County’s “Chiv” faction. An attorney and powerful political actor, Brent specialized in defending Californio land claims. His fluent Spanish and Catholic background helped him win clients, political allies and...
friends among the Californios. Andrés Pico was all three. And since he never learned to read or speak English all that well, Pico relied on Brent to help him navigate the new American political system. But Brent and other Southern-born Chivs needed Pico as well. He was widely respected by Anglos and Mexicans alike. During the war with Mexico, Pico had orchestrated a successful lightning attack on United States forces at the Battle of San Pascual near San Diego. In addition to earning him the respect of his countrymen, this episode also left an indelible impression on the Americans that would later jibe with the Chivalry ideal. Armed as if medieval knights, Pico and his forces wielded lances from horseback against a larger body of American soldiers whose firearms had been rendered useless by wet gunpowder. Following this victory, Pico sealed his reputation among the Americans as a worthy adversary by graciously accepting defeat on behalf of Alta California in the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga.

Pico’s status as a Californio Chiv and chastened war hero made him a perfect front man for Southern California separation. As a state assemblyman representing Los Angeles County, Pico sponsored legislation in 1859 that came close — far closer than most modern day Californians probably realize — to splitting the state. The “Pico Bill” called for the six southern counties—from San Luis Obispo to San Diego—to break away from the state and form the sovereign “Territory of Colorado.” When it went north to Sacramento, the Pico Bill was approved by the legislature, the governor, and by an overwhelming majority of Southern California voters.

But the buck stopped when the bill went to Washington for Congressional action, which would have been required in order to form a new territory out of existing jurisdictions. There was no Congressional action. Either because Congress had plenty to wrestle with in the late spring of 1859, or because that body feared yet another impulse towards war — or both — nothing happened.

Back in California, the odd — but understandable — alliance between Mexicans and Southerners eventually fell apart against the backdrop of the Civil War. From the California point of view, the risks of rebelling against the United States and siding with the Confederacy, however quietly, must have outweighed any possible benefits secession from California might bring. As the nation teetered on the brink, Pico wrote to fellow Californio Chivs from Sacramento. He expressed his fear that “the union is at risk of breaking up.” California Chivs ought to remain “very united” and “do something for our country.” Pico had set out to break up the state, not the nation.

Some Angeleno Southerners, meanwhile, returned east to fight for the Confederacy. None of their Californio allies followed suit. Rather, a Union battalion of “Native Calvary” was organized in California. This unit included a diverse assortment of Latinos, including a few elite Californios (and, apparently, a single Sardinian), and was part of a larger force sent to patrol and garrison the desert borderland between California and Texas. This cavalry helped disperse motley Confederate forces, confronted Indians, and kept an eye on potentially hostile French soldiers then occupying Mexico.

As David Hayes-Bautista and Cynthia Chamberlain have recently shown, it was the presence of French occupying forces in Mexico that actually encouraged many Mexican Americans to support the Union. Mexican political organizations throughout California called juntas patrióticas raised money for the embattled republic of Mexico. These organizations — the largest of which was in Los Angeles — placed Mexican patriotism first and foremost, but allegiance to the Union and United States was seen as a complementary political loyalty. At one of the earliest Cinco de Mayo celebrations in American history, held in May of 1863, the Los Angeles junta commemorated the first anniversary of the Mexican victory over French forces in the Battle of Puebla with a ceremony that honored the United States and Mexico. The flags of the two republics were flown side by side and a California urged the crowd to support both nations. It is an interesting prologue to our modern-day immigration debates that Spanish-speaking Mexicans in Los Angeles were among the ardent supporters of Lincoln’s Union. Such reconciliation is harder to find for those white Californians who supported the Confederacy in word or deed. Statewide Chiv leader William Gwin, a Tennessee doctor turned California gold mining millionaire, imagined a pro-slavery “Republic of the Pacific” in the far West. Just because secession of that sort had not happened before the war was no reason to give up hope, Gwin believed. In an 1863 letter to his friend, and now Confederate Brigadier General, Joseph Lancaster Brent, Gwin imagined a very different future for California than what eventually played out. “When the war is over and the South gains her independence [my family] will return to California.” Perhaps Brent could return as well. Everything hinged on the outcome of the Civil War. A victory in that war would mean victory in the far West. “If we conquer we can put down the Yankees there & return to California.” Perhaps Brent could return as well. Everything hinged on the outcome of the Civil War. A victory in that war would mean victory in the far West. “If we conquer we can put down the Yankees there & return to California.”

Gwin’s letter, and the story of the California secession that almost was, should remind us of several things. California was anything but immune from the stresses, tensions, and enmities of the Civil War era. Nor was it at all clear during the mid-nineteenth century how destiny would manifest itself — either in the entirety of the United States or in our diverse and dynamic corner of the American Southwest.

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Hyphenated cultures seem to be a natural part of California’s landscape today, but it wasn’t always so. *The Lucky Ones* by Mae Ngai offers a fresh look at California history by reconstructing the lives of immigrant and second generation pioneers who lived between cultures when it was not such a common phenomenon. Ngai’s narrative brings Chinese Americans into a richer tradition of historical storytelling by humanizing an ambivalent, middle-class immigrant family, situating their lives within the more well-known histories of Chinese laborers and those who suffered from the 1882 Exclusion Act.

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