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The Manifestations of Destiny

by *Félix F. Gutiérrez*

UP THE STREET and around the corner from our early twentieth-century Craftsman home in South Pasadena, California, is an older home that may have impacted my life even more than the wood-frame house my family has owned since 1956.

A single-story adobe home framed by red roof tiles and a cactus garden, El Adobe Flores seemed just an out-of-place curiosity near the modern apartment houses to which I delivered newspapers in the 1950s. Only later did I learn how much what happened there in January 1847 affected my life, the lives of my ancestors, and my children's lives.

It was in that adobe owned by Manuel Garfias on the Rancho Rincón de San Pascual on January 11, 1847, that Californio militia and volunteers led by Mexican captain José María Flores met to discuss whether to make peace with invading United States armed forces. Driven by a hunger for new lands to fulfill its self-proclaimed Manifest

Destiny, the U.S. military had prematurely proclaimed its conquest of California the previous summer shortly after learning the United States had declared war on Mexico. Mexican military units were transferred to fight closer to Mexico City, taking with them the weapons of many Californios. Mexico's leaders focused on defending the central territories, not distant outposts on the northern and western edge of what was once the Spanish Empire.

So the Californios took matters into their own hands. Outnumbering the occupation forces that imposed harsh martial law, the pobladores in Los Angeles struck back in September 1846, forcing the U.S. military to seek shelter on a merchant ship anchored at San Pedro. The Californios enjoyed "a long winning streak, from late September to mid-December—capturing the Americans at Chino . . . defeating the navy at San Pedro . . . and exacting a grim toll at San Pasqual

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and La Natividad” among other battles, one historian noted. Effectively employing lances, lassoes, and superior horsemanship, the Californios restored their own order.

They faced an impressive opponent prepared for war. U.S. naval vessels could easily move troops and munitions up and down the coast. In December 1846, General Stephen W. Watts Kearny’s Army of the West ended its desert trek following battles in New Mexico to join with Commodore Robert F. Stockton’s forces in San Diego. Later that month their combined forces of about six hundred men prepared to move north to recapture the Pueblo of Los Angeles.

Ahead of them was Flores’s force of about five hundred Californio militia and volunteers, a homeland defense facing heavily armed invaders. Flores’s troops’ “courageous determination to defend and preserve their nationality offset the disparity of weapons, munitions, and numbers of soldiers. Even though they were at a disadvantage, they were not frightened as they were lying in wait to see if they could strike a decisive blow when the commodore approached,” wrote Californio Antonio María Osio in his 1851 history of California.

U.S. military leaders had learned the hard way that the Californios were smart strategists and tough fighters. Heading north from San Diego on January 3, 1847, Commodore Stockton



warned Lieutenant Colonel John Charles Frémont, inching south toward Los Angeles from San Juan Bautista, that his force of 350 men “had better not fight the rebels until I get up to aid you or you can join me on the road to the Pueblo.”

These fellows are well prepared, and [U.S. Navy Captain William] Merivine’s and Kearny’s defeat have given them a deal more confidence and courage,” Stockton wrote. “They will probably try to deceive you by a sudden retreat, or pretended runaway, then unexpectedly return to charge you after your men get in disorder in the chase. My advice is to allow them to do all the charging and running and let your rifles do the rest. In the art of horsemanship, of dodging, and running, it is in vain to compete with them.”

As Stockton and Kearny approached Los Angeles from the south, Flores carefully chose a battlefield. But his forces were outgunned on the banks of the San Gabriel River on January 8 and at La Mesa on January 9. To avoid damaging the pueblo and its inhabitants, the Yanquis were allowed to enter Los Angeles peacefully on January 10. Regrouping northeast of the pueblo, Flores and Californio leaders met at the Garfias adobe in present-day South Pasadena to decide their future.

Outnumbered, outgunned, and caught between Stockton and Kearny’s

reoccupation of Los Angeles and Frémont’s advance to the San Fernando Mission, they had few military options. But a diplomatic option unexpectedly arrived in the person of respected Californio Jesús Pico, Frémont’s peace emissary. Flores considered Pico’s message and decided to continue fighting closer to Mexico City. Although the future Mexican general was there for only a short time, the Garfias adobe was later renamed El Adobe Flores, recognizing the Californios’ last Mexican commander.

Flores’s successor, Andrés Pico, and fellow Californios had faced Stockton and Kearny in battle and feared the worst if they tried to negotiate with them. In early December, Andrés Pico had beaten Kearny

at the Battle of San Pasqual outside of San Diego. Eighteen U.S. troopers were killed and Kearny himself suffered lance wounds. Having never formally battled Frémont, the Californios in the adobe decided to negotiate with someone who might consider their terms.

Though outranked by General Kearny and Commodore Stockton, Lieutenant Colonel Frémont received the Californios’ “propositions of peace or cessation of hostilities,” and on January 12 ordered a one-day armistice to negotiate with the Californios.



Guided by terms discussed at the Garfias adobe, Andrés Pico's "Californian Forces under the Mexican Flag" met the U.S. commissioners in the home of Don Tomás Feliz at the northern end of Cahuenga Pass.

Signed on January 13, 1847, near the site of today's Universal City in the San Fernando Valley, the Treaty of Cahuenga marked the official end of military operations between Mexico and the United States in California.

The Californios agreed to deliver to Frémont "their artillery and Public Arms, and . . . return peaceably to their homes conforming to the Laws and Regulations of the United States." Frémont anticipated he would need help from Californio leaders if he were appointed governor of California, a title conferred on him by Stockton three days later. So the treaty imposed no sanctions on the Californios and promised "equal rights and privileges are vouchsafed to every citizen of California as are enjoyed by the citizens of the United States of North America." However, this and similar promises in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended warfare between the two nations in February 1848 were not respected by all newcomers after California joined the union. Tense relations and violence

between Anglos and Californios continued well into the latter half of the nineteenth century.

El Adobe Flores is barely a footnote in history books. But its importance in the United States expansion into Spanish and Mexican territories ranging from Florida to California is more than symbolic to me. My ancestors, who came to Alta California's San Gabriel Mission before the American Revolution, were among the Californios who fought the

U.S. military and others who supported their California conquest. Like most Latinos, my presence in the United States today is inextricably linked to this country's nineteenth century territorial ambitions.

Early in the 1800s, President Thomas Jefferson expressed a vision

of predestined expansion into Spanish territories. This vision became a reality with the addition of Florida and part of Alabama in the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 and the taking of Mexico's territory from Louisiana and Arkansas west to the Pacific Ocean and as far north as Wyoming in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 and Gadsden Purchase of 1853. After the Spanish-American War of 1898 the United States kept Puerto Rico, established governments friendly to its interests in Cuba and the Philippines, and set the stage for future



military actions in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Mexico, Panama, and other Latin American nations. U.S. leaders saw expansion of territory and influence as the nation's Manifest Destiny, but focused more on adding real estate than assessing the social legacy of the people on or near newly acquired lands. Along with the territories came the Latino people who lived on them, including my Californio forebears.

When I was a boy my father told me the straight facts without rancor or anger: "The Anglos came. We welcomed them. And then they turned against us." He could just as easily have said, "We didn't cross the border. The border crossed us."

The treaties allowed Mexicans in conquered territories to head south across the new border. But my ancestors had no Mexico to go back to. Their

homes were now in the United States and, like most, they stayed put. Though homes have changed, we still live and own property in the San Gabriel Valley.

After the war my great-grandfather became a blacksmith in El Monte, repairing covered wagons and shoeing horses of Anglos reaching the Santa Fe Trail's end.

My grandfather was baptized at the San Gabriel Mission in the 1870s and

became a cement contractor, laying irrigation ditches and sidewalks as agriculture and housing boomed in the San Gabriel Valley into the 1920s. Born in 1918, my father grew up in Monrovia, east of Los Angeles, was sent to segregated schools before attending high school, and then attended college on his way to becoming a junior high school teacher in the late 1940s.

Along the way we learned from the Anglos who came to California and offered them our ways, even though many felt the only meaningful remnants of Spanish and Mexican California were the names of mountains, rivers, and cities. Most felt they could offer us more than we could offer them. But my ancestors absorbed from both sides, learning the language and ways of the Anglos without rejecting their own.

Born in 1943, I've always lived in a world of more than one language, culture, and nation. I live in what used to be Mexico. Nearby is a Mexico from which people have long come north across borderlines to reinforce multicultural borderlands. My Mexican-born mother, who grew up and graduated from college in the United States, began teaching school in the 1930s. Though proudly a naturalized U.S. citizen, she strengthened our interest in the country of her birth and also a pride in recognizing our identities as Latinos in a nation of people of all races and cultures.

We Latinos who find ourselves living in territories now held by





the United States are helping to reshape America's Manifest Destiny. Though many are immigrants, we don't fit into the assimilation melting pot that once defined what was expected of newcomers. Instead, our American stew pot—in which we have retained our identity while also contributing to and absorbing the flavors of others—is becoming the prototype for the future. Though some of us are of darker shades, we also do not fit into the racial dynamics of a nation that long has seen race relations mainly as a matter of black and white. At 38.8 million people and growing, U.S. Latinos can be white, brown, black, and even

Asian Pacific. We can be Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims and still be full-blooded Latinos, if there is such a thing.

African Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans comprise more than a third of the nation's population and are projected to become the majority by mid-century. Americans of all colors are understanding it is to their advantage to learn about more than one language, one culture, and one nation. Latinos have been doing so for generations. And others might help themselves by taking a closer look at how we have done it.