HISTORIA
A TYPE SPECIMEN
FEATURING FONTS FROM THE
Emigre Type Library
IN A SPECTACULAR DISPLAY OF D EPICTI ONS AND D ESCRIPTIONS OF
BATTLEFIELD
LOCATIONS OF THE
U.S.-MEXICAN WAR
1846-1848
CALIFORNIA
and musings on

TYPOGRAPHY

TOPOGRAPHY

PHOTOGRAPHY

ESTABLISHED IN 1984 BERKELEY CALIFORNIA
An Introduction

Our customers often ask us for suggestions regarding typeface combinations. As much as we’d like to give advice, we tend to steer clear of recommendations, because pairing and mixing fonts is a subjective art and depends largely on context.

While there are some basic rules to get safe results, we believe that ultimately any font can be successfully combined with any other font. It’s not so much a matter of which font combinations to pick, it’s a matter of how you use the fonts in combination. Size, color, tracking, contrast, layout and overall purpose determine how fonts can be combined successfully.

To illustrate this, we put together this special type specimen booklet exhibiting a wide variety of Emigre Fonts in both obvious and unexpected combinations.

To create a proper context—and not waste an opportunity to tell a story—we reassigned a project we had been working on that was looking for a final destination. This allowed us to show the fonts in a real life application, as opposed to the customary use of “Greeking,” while giving the type specimen booklet a purpose beyond showcasing type.

Historia is a project that was conceived in 2007. It started as a series of thirteen panoramic photographs depicting battlefield locations in California of the U.S. ~ Mexican war of 1846–1848. The idea was to publish these panoramas in a coffee-table book featuring elaborate fold-out pages.

After the completion of the panoramas, the desire arose to incorporate captions and other texts directly into the images to provide background information and context. History offered both precedent and inspiration. Nineteenth Century
panoramic images, maps, and “bird’s-eye” views of popular and historical sites were often adorned with descriptions and keys elaborating on the subject matter of the image. Text and image were usually fully integrated into the image.

Instead of simulating these historical styles, which were closely linked to the reproduction and typesetting methods of the time, we took liberty to try an approach that was evocative of various historical forms of American typographic styles but was made with distinctly contemporary design sensibilities and typefaces (from the Emigre Type Library).

The result was a series of “labels,” one for each panorama, resembling a hybrid of antique bond certificates and California orange crate labels. Each label contained an abbreviated description of the event, including place name, date and other relevant information. The final designs were distinguished by a plethora of typefaces, ornaments and patterns in a variety of combinations and configurations.

The project was turned on its ear when these typographic treatments became more prominent than the panoramic photographs they were supposed to adorn. This shift in direction caused us to rethink how the project could best be published. So we put it aside for a while, until we realized it would lend itself perfectly for this type specimen booklet highlighting font combinations from the Emigre Type Library.

RVDL
I didn’t know this, but in 1846 the United States of America declared war on Mexico to capture the northern provinces of Alta California and New Mexico. The decisive battles determining the outcome of the war were waged primarily in Mexico, but a series of significant skirmishes occurred within California. The locations of those events in California are the subject of the thirteen panoramic photographs and typographic treatments presented in this specimen.
A history buff I’m not, but it’s difficult not to like the stories. I’m also not a conceptualist, but it helps to have a specific idea when you set out to make a series of photographs.

What exactly got me started on this series I can’t remember, but at some point I became curious about the recurring names that adorn the streets, highways, cities, parks, and public schools in California; Carillo, Kearny, Pico, Larkin, Alvarado, Castro, Montgomery, Cabrillo, Stockton, Vallejo, Frémont... Who were these men?

I’ve always been fascinated with local history because studying it enriches the experience of where you live, and deepens the connection to your neighborhood. It gives you a new perspective on your surroundings. So I started reading. I bought books, visited historical places and local museums, and checked out the internet. I then learned that the above mentioned men had all played significant parts in a war engaged by the U.S. against Mexico from 1846 until 1848. The reason for the war was Mexico’s northern territories and the U.S. government’s desire to seize them.

THE CONTROVERSIAL CONCEPT

of Manifest Destiny had put the United States on a collision course with anything that stood in the way of the creation of a vast nation stretching from coast to coast. It was a foregone conclusion that Mexico’s northern provinces of Alta California and New Mexico (encompassing the current states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas) would eventually be taken by the U.S.

But the big prize was Alta California. Besides its fertile land, the United States government was particularly keen on California’s potential ports which could function as gateways to the Far East. At the time, neither government was aware that gold lay hidden just below its surface.

After negotiations to purchase the territories had failed, the U.S. declared war on Mexico in May 1846 after hostilities had broken out between American and Mexican troops in disputed border territory along the Rio Grande. President Polk blocked Mexican ports and sent the U.S. army into Mexico hoping to force a quick resolution. Troops also marched into New Mexico and Alta California securing the sought after northern provinces.

The Mexicans had no choice but to defend their rights and territorial integrity. While Polk had counted on swift success and surrender, the war dragged on for nearly two years. It wasn’t until United States forces invaded and then occupied Mexico City that the Mexican government capitulated and agreed to the terms laid out in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ceded Alta California and New Mexico territories to the United States. It was a brutal war, with over 38,000 dead.

The American troops which had marched into Alta California had fared slightly better. At least at first. Sparsely populated, the territory was taken with little or no resistance. But unscrupulous behavior by U.S. occupational forces soon led to an insurrection by the Californios who revolted and kicked the occupiers out of most settlements. It took the Americans nearly a year to reestablish dominance. Hostilities in Alta California were ended with the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga.

That’s the simplified version of the story. The actual story of how California became a Union State is a complicated one—not least because the allegiance of the participants in the war was not always clear cut—and is punctuated with enough acts of bravery, political intrigue, and military incompetence on both sides to have filled numerous books. The men whose names are listed on the opposite page played major roles in this chapter of California history.
LOCATING HISTORY

The focus of this project, however, is not so much the men who appeared in it, or the intricacies of the war itself, but the locations in California where the main battles and events took place. While studying the history, I became aware of thirteen sites that were mentioned repeatedly. They were spread out between Sonoma and San Diego, a distance of roughly 600 miles. Random spots, for the most part, picked by fate. Yet as back drops to historic events, today their names hold specific meaning, and commemorative plaques placed on those sites recognize their significance. The most elaborately preserved site is at San Pasqual near San Diego, designated by a State Park and museum. Some have extensively researched books written about them such as the Battle of Santa Clara. Others are impossible to pin point, such as La Mesa, where the commemorative plaque seems to have disappeared and the spot where it was supposed to be according to the maps is actually incorrect.

THE PROMISED LANDSCAPE

These battlefield locations are of interest to me because of the role they played in California’s history which infuses these places with a certain aura. It’s difficult to explain exactly what that aura is and how it manifests itself. It’s even more difficult to photograph it (does aura wear off?) But that’s my modus operandi. Instead of picking places for their geographical beauty, interesting architecture, or simply for their photogenic appeal, I pick them for their historical and cultural significance. It’s the stories surrounding them that inspire me to photograph these locations. Perhaps I’m more conceptually minded than I’d like to admit.

This sets up a particular esthetic challenge because historical and cultural significance does not automatically coincide with geographical beauty or photogenically inclined subjects. As I venture out to locate these spots I have usually no idea what to expect, and more often than not it’s a huge disappointment. The sites are commonly mundane and unremarkable. They’re also often developed and built over, thereby erasing any signs that would link them to their past. Which is where the esthetic challenge comes in.

I knew from the outset that some of these images would end up looking rather pedestrian. Not only did I force myself to photograph locations that I was unfamiliar with and which offered no particular visual attraction, but I also tried to be at the scene on the exact day of the year and time of day that the battle took place. This I did to satisfy my own curiosity in the subject—to feel the temperature, experience the slant of the sun, observe the state of the vegetation, etc. I wanted to duplicate the ambiance best I could to deepen the connection between the actual date of the event and my visit.

This didn’t always work out to my advantage. Photographing at predetermined times often resulted in less than perfect lighting circumstances. Light makes all the difference in a photograph. An otherwise dull looking landscape can be dramatic when lit up by a late afternoon sun. This is usually how photographers work; they either stumble upon beautifully lit scenes by accident and make a photograph, or they wait for hours to get the perfect lighting. I’ve always felt there’s a level of conceit in that. So I set out to do the exact opposite. I figured that to steer clear of the obvious in landscape photography would lead to surprising results. And it did, but not always to great effect. The landscape I found at Rio San Gabriel, for instance, has tremendous visual potential due to its setting and vistas, but since it was a gray and overcast day, hiding the beautiful backdrop of the snow covered San Gabriel Mountains, it was a dreary scene with little definition or drama (see next page).

RHETORIC

Unlike the battles that were fought within Mexico, which were large scale events including thousands of troops, the ones in California, with a few exceptions, can hardly be called battles. It is perhaps better to describe these engagements between the Californios and the United States forces as skirmishes. There was a lot of posturing, horsemanship, maneuvering, and military vessels sailing up and down the California coast. Many of the skirmishes were the result of both parties raiding each others horses, a prized source of transportation. The forces involved on both sides were counted not in thousands but hundreds, often fewer than that. With the exception of the Battle of San Pasqual, few men were killed. California was not a very populated place at the time, if you don’t count the natives, who must have wondered what was going on. Two nations were battling it out over a territory that they, the native Indians, had inhabited for as long as they could remember. But that’s another story.
It’s the purpose of the photographer to make esthetically pleasing images. No matter how great the story behind it, if the image doesn’t appeal visually, few will take notice. On the other hand, the significance of a photograph is often enhanced, sometimes even determined, by the story that surrounds it. So the stories do matter. When visiting the annual photography expositions, where galleries, dealers, and collectors come together, I love listening to the dealers making their pitches—and in my mind they’re not selling photographs, they’re selling stories.

So why make photographs when the stories are so important? It’s a good question, and the best answer I can offer is to state that I’m a photographer, not a writer. But I am interested in how far you can push the balance between an image that can stand entirely on its own and one that would benefit from a story to make it interesting. Image makers know that by attaching a story or a caption to a picture it can change the meaning of the image, and in the process make it more intriguing or memorable. But can you manipulate this process by making unremarkable photographs and bringing them to life simply by adding an interesting story? I’m not sure. But the experiment seemed a worthy one with negligible downside. At minimum, the effort helps keep alive a nearly forgotten episode of California history.
HISTORIA

GAVILÁN
SONOMA
OLOMPALI
MONTEREY
CHINO
LOS ANGELES
RANCHO DOMINGUEZ
NATIVIDAD
SAN PASQUAL
SANTA CLARA
La Mesa

TYPEFACES FROM THE TOP: OBLONG, MR EAVES XL SANS, BROTHERS, COUNCIL, DOGMA, FAIRPLEX, DOGMA, PRIORI SANS, SOLEX, MATRIX WIDE, MODULA ROUND SERIF, FAIRPLEX, KEEDY SANS, SABBATH BLACK, DALLIANE ORNAMENTS: DALLIANE AND PUZZLER.

OPPOSITE PAGE: WHIRLIGIG PATTERN.
There’s only one other car parked in the lot at Frémont Peak State Park. It’s a Lincoln Continental. An older couple is winding their way down the short trail from the top of the peak. When they arrive at the parking lot, I ask if they’re Frémont fans, and they both shrug their shoulders saying they don’t know who Frémont is. They’re from Fremont, Ohio, and they’re on a trip through California and Nevada and on their way to Laughlin to do some casino gambling. I tell them about Lt. Frémont’s bold move in March 1846 to plant a flag atop this peak in the middle of Mexican territory, and they’re both surprised to hear that California used to belong to Mexico. “It explains why we see so many Mexicans here,” they say. It doesn’t really explain it, but the idea seems to make it more acceptable to them.
“ON JUNE 14, 1846, AT ABOUT 5:30 IN THE MORNING
an old man named Don Pepe de la Rosa came to my home and
told me that a group of seventy two ragged desperadoes had surrounded
General Vallejo’s house. They arrested General Vallejo, Captain Salvador
Vallejo, and Victor Prudón... Some of the men were wearing caps made
from the skins of coyotes or wolves. Others were wearing slouch hats
full of holes or straw hats as black as charcoal. Most of these maraud-
ers had on buckskin pants, but some were wearing blue pants that
reached only to the knee. Several of the men were not wearing shirts,
and only fifteen or twenty of the whole bunch were wearing shoes.

After General Vallejo was hurriedly taken away, the marauders who
had stayed behind in Sonoma raised a piece of linen cloth on the flag-
pole located in the corner of the plaza near the old mission church.
The cloth was about the size of a large towel, and they had painted a red
bear and one star on it.”

Mrs. Rosalía Leese, quoted in the book Testimonios, Early California through the Eyes of Women, 1815-1848.

And so started the Republic of California,
a short-lived affair leading to the eventual takeover
of California by the United States of America.
WILLIAMS SAID HE NEVER WAS SO FRIGHTENED IN HIS LIFE as when several shots were fired at him and from the sound several balls passed within an inch of his head, and he looked each side of him to enable them to keep as near as possible in the center of the gap and hence as far as possible away from the enemy but was perfectly horrified just as they got between the wings to see Smith suddenly wheel his horse and start at full speed directly meeting the wing and yelling like a wild Indian. When the foremost man fired at him and missed him, he then wheeled his horse and Smith fired just as his side was turned to him putting the ball through the part of his body that was in the saddle. After which Smith went to the front where he went in to the fight with perfect vengeance, his actions being so remarkable as to attract the attention of the whole company, who all agreed that there was not the slightest particle of fear in his nature, as he shouted and laughed heartily during the whole of the fight, and no one doubted that it was the most enjoyable treat of his life.”


More than 1000 lightning-sparked wildfires were raging in Northern California when I took this photograph in Olompali State Park. That’s why the sky, although clear of clouds or overcast, looks so ominously gray. It’s filled with smoke particles.

June 24th, 1846

OLOMPALI STATE HISTORIC PARK
MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 27, 2007

Approximate LOCATION OF THE BATTLE of OLOMPALI

A SKIRMISH BETWEEN MEXICAN FORCES & AMERICAN SETTLERS Which took place on JUNE 24TH, 1846

RANCHO OLOMPALI
MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 27, 2007

BETWEEN MEXICAN FORCES & AMERICAN SETTLERS Which took place on JUNE 24TH, 1846
The Park Ranger at the Custom House in Monterey seems happy to chat. When I walked in she was reading the biography of Thomas O. Larkin, the American consul in Mexican California who built the Custom House and who was one of the most influential Americans in Monterey at the time when American troops claimed possession of California on July 7th, 1846.

It’s a beautiful summer day, and the front doors to the Custom House are wide open and the view from her desk is of Monterey harbor, the spot I plan to photograph. I ask her if this is the exact spot where the American troops landed, and she seems surprised that I would even ask since there are plenty of images hanging on the walls of the Custom House that show this to be the spot. I check out the prints, which are all third or fourth generation copies of the handful of paintings and lithographs that I’ve come across in most of the history books about the war.

As I’m studying the prints, I notice that some of the images depict an earlier attempt to occupy Monterey. In 1842, Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones of the U.S. Pacific squadron, lacking accurate information whether war had been officially declared, had jumped the gun and on October 19th went ashore, raised the American flag, and demanded that Monterey surrender. When no official proof of a war declaration could be furnished, Jones immediately restored the Mexican flag, withdrew his troops, and apologized to California’s Governor Michaeletorena.
SEPTEMBER 20, 1846. Ah! What I would not give to be able to think like the last time that I wrote. I have so much. And I can get anything else I want from my cousin Juan Alvarado, who still has so much power. But everything is changing. It is like trying to catch a shadow that keeps moving farther away as it takes our cherished times with it. It must be God’s will. I should not be sad. It must be the withering leaves or the lack of fog that makes us sad. But destiny is not merciless!

Things are going to change!

From the journal by Angustias de la Guerra Ord, 1846-1847.
Published in Testimonios: Early California through the Eyes of Women, 1815-1848.

Text set in Malaga Regular 12/18 pt. Date set in Los Feliz Bold 10 pt.
ON MY FIRST EXPLORATORY TRIP OUT HERE, I set up my tripod on Hill Street which is an elevated street that runs along the side of what used to be a significant hill but is now being prepped to accommodate a shopping center. I set up facing southeast looking out over a parking lot and Olvera Street, the historic center of Pueblo De Los Angeles, with the mountains in the far distance. Slightly to the right is downtown Los Angeles. Behind me, on the other side of the street, along the hill side, is a monumental mural commemorating the early pioneers that settled Los Angeles. Curiously, there’s no mention of the historical event that brought me to this spot.

At the top of this hill, Lt. Archibald Gillespie and his U.S. troops were forced to find cover after Mexican insurgents had chased them out of their downtown government house. The Siege of Los Angeles lasted the entire night of September the 29th. And while it was a tense night for all involved, no real fighting ensued. The next morning, the Americans surrendered and were instructed to leave Los Angeles by way of San Pedro.

LATER, ON A SECOND TRIP, I decide to take the photo from the foot of the hill on Broadway looking up towards the hill, or what is left of it. This way I avoid shooting straight into the sun and at the same time I look at the scene from the Mexican point of view. It occurs to me that I’m always looking at these scenes from the American point of view. I wonder if I should go back and redo some of these panoramas to balance things out.
Finding Rancho Dominguez is easy.

It’s a historical landmark with a street address. What is more tricky is to determine where the actual battle took place. Even though the plaque to commemorate the battle is placed right in front of the rancho, I know it’s not the spot of the battle.

Since the event is often referred to as The Battle of Dominguez Hills, I drive around the rancho to see if there are any hills in the neighborhood. It’s an industrial area and there are no apparent hills in sight, just large distribution centers—big boxes with small offices in the front with manicured lawns. By accident I find the entrance to a suburban development called Dominguez Hills. There’s a tiny guard house with a boom barrier and behind it a road that leads up a long slope. Perhaps this is my hill. I decide I’ve found the right spot. I shoot a series of panoramas while the guard in the booth looks at me suspiciously but never leaves his post to ask what I’m doing.

That night in the motel I reread the passages in a book featuring a first-hand account, and I realize the spot I photographed is too far to the south. Gillespie and Mervine arrived at the Rancho Dominguez, spent the night there, and then continued the next morning heading north. Shortly after their march resumed, they ran into Carillo’s troops, and the battle started. I’m guessing they followed what is now Alameda Street, since that long running street is often mentioned as a common corridor between San Pedro and downtown Los Angeles. I should look for a spot just north of Rancho Dominguez. I pick the corner of Alameda and Homestead Place. It gives me a clear shot down Alameda facing downtown L.A.
IT'S PARTIALLY SUNNY AND COLD, and a heavy fog is rolling in from the Salinas Plain. I've decided to shoot the scene facing west which is the direction the American troops were moving in when they came upon this spot. They found their way from San Juan Bautista through the Gavilán Mountains and from what I've been able to find out, the route they took roughly followed the road now called the Salinas Grade. So I set up my tripod facing west looking straight into a low sun, the light of which is refracted into a blinding whiteness by the incoming fog. The skirmish supposedly took place around three to four in the afternoon, so I wait around to get the same kind of light.

By the time I'm done photographing, it's completely overcast, foggy, and even colder. I quickly dismantle my camera, get back into my car, and crank up the heat. Before I drive off, I pick up the biography of Thomas Larkin, the American consul to California who was there to witness the battle as he was being held hostage by the Mexican troops. Much of the accounts of this battle come from his first-hand observations. I reread the section about the ordeal of his capture just outside Monterey and then the long ride on horseback to Los Angeles—a 300 mile trip. I read that all he needed to sustain himself each day was a cup of tea or coffee for breakfast. Larkin was not a young man. I feel like a softy and turn down the heat in the car.

"The San Jose company was made up of American rancheros, runaway sailors, Englishmen, Germans and Negroes—the most motley crew that ever fought under one flag (except a death's head and crossbones) and commanded by a Southern dare-devil, at once a desperado and a gentleman, if you can imagine such a commingling of opposite characters, known as B. K. Thompson, and sometimes (let me not shock ears polite) as 'h—(infernal pit) roaring Thompson.'"

Edward C. Kemble, quoted in the book Bear Flag Lieutenant by Fred B. Rogers.
I’m standing in front of a large panoramic window looking out over the San Pasqual Valley. In front of me, placed horizontally, is a huge map of the area seen outside with intricate directional lines and descriptions of the movement of the troops involved in the Battle of San Pasqual. I’m the only visitor at the San Pasqual State Historic Park Museum. A volunteer walks up to me, and we chat about the battle. He seems to know the area well. He tells me he lives in Ramona, just a few miles up the road. He’s Mexican-American. I ask him how he likes living up here. The back drop of mountains, rolling hills dotted with oak trees, horse ranches and vineyards, is typically pastoral California. We both agree, it’s paradise on earth.

After shooting a number of panoramas from the hillside behind the museum (see pages 8-9), I drive to the other side of the valley and set up my tripod at the intersection of Bandy Canyon Road and Ysabel Creek Road. The orientation seems to make more sense since Kearny’s Army of the West moved from the east to the west, from right to left, which relates better to the orientation of the image. And from this position the sun is in my back. The only drawback is that it’s getting late in the day. The main battle took place early in the morning, and according to first-hand accounts it was foggy and cold. It had rained the day before the battle.

My timing is off anyway. Due to circumstances, I’m five weeks early. Ironically, had I been at this location closer to the correct date, I might have found circumstances even more unusual. Two days after my visit, wild fires broke out all over San Diego County. Thousands of homes and structures burned. And in the early morning hours on October the 21st, the Witch Creek Fire burned through the area that I had just photographed. The museum building survived the fire, but there was significant damage to the park’s infrastructure. The fire also raged through the town of Ramona destroying many houses. I’m reminded of the museum volunteer and hope he came through okay.

“A strict, impartial and thorough investigation proved that the sum total amounted to dead, none; wounded, none; missing, but one on the American side, and he came up shortly afterwards, stating that he had been searching for his ramrod, which in the excitement of the moment, he had forgotten to draw from his gun, and had fired at the enemy.”

From a letter filed by Joseph Downey, quoted in The Battle of Santa Clara by Dorothy F. Regnery.
The Rio Honda Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds, an expansive groundwater contamination prevention plan managed by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, is located on the exact spot where the Americans crossed the San Gabriel river to engage the Mexican troops in one of the last battles before the Americans retook L.A.

It’s a hazy day, and the snow-covered San Gabriel Mountains, which only the day before had been brilliantly lit after a rain storm, were now barely visible. Just the faintest delineation of the mountain tops is visible, and only if you know where to look. In Los Angeles, after a rainstorm clears the particles out of the atmosphere, the beautiful topography of the mountains surrounding the L.A. Basin is exposed. But the splendor lasts only for a day, as the all-enshrouding haziness usually returns overnight.

Standing there, I can’t help wondering if the soldiers had a clear view of the mountains. Or if they would have noticed the view, since they were about to engage an unknown number of Mexican soldiers who were perfectly positioned on top of the cliffs overlooking the river.

“The river was about 100 yards wide, knee-deep, and flowing over quick sand. Either side was fringed with a thick undergrowth. The approach on our side was level; that on the enemy’s was favorable to him. A bank fifty feet high, ranged parallel with the river, at point blank cannon distance, upon which he posted his artillery.”

From Notes of a Military Reconnaissance by W.H. Emory, 1848.
OF ALL THE SITES I VISITED, the La Mesa battlefield location was perhaps the most difficult to pin down. My street maps of Los Angeles locate the spot on the corner of Exchange and Downey streets in Vernon. The designation on the map reads: BATTLE DE LA MESA MON. The California State Parks web site lists the address at 4490 Exchange Street, which is closer to the Los Angeles River. Other resources list the address as the 4500 block of Downey, which is pretty much where the Los Angeles maps place it.

I drive to the site, but can’t find any sign of a plaque or monument. The neighborhood is all chain link fences, distribution centers, utility poles and train tracks. I study copies of the crudely drawn maps produced shortly after the battle by topographical engineer Lt. W. H. Emory, and notice that the location on Downey indicates the encampment of the Americans after the battle. The actual battle, according to Emory’s maps, took place on the other side of the Los Angeles River, somewhere between the river and a large “depression” in the landscape. I set up at the corner of South Downey Road and Bandini Avenue on the north side of the river and shoot facing east. I feel confident this is it.

As I’m photographing a freight train comes by and it takes nearly half an hour to pass, blocking my view and taking up precious time as the sun is starting to sink quite low. Traffic backs up for miles.

“The only article of clothing issued to the battalion by the United States was the sailor’s common blue flannel shirt, with broad collar and a star worked with white thread in each corner. This, worn over other clothing and gathered around the waist by the broad, greasy, leather belt—from which was depended hunting knife and pistols—was the only uniform of the battalion. Most of the men wore buckskin trowsers, sometimes fringed down the outer seam with buckskin and red flannel intermixed, moccasins on their feet, and their heads crowned with the broad-rimmed Mexican hat, minus the black oil-silk cover.”

was altogether unlike the California of a year after, or any subsequent period. The influence of the old padres had been broken, and the clash of arms had rudely interrupted the sleepy placidity of their lives. The American, whose restless energy and unquenchable ambition rendered him an object of perplexity and terror to those staid old souls, had, it is true, conquered the country, but he was scarcely yet prepared to possess it. There seemed, indeed, to be a lull in the stirring life of the previous years. The people were waiting, unconsciously to themselves, for something which was to change the aspect of affairs, and was to draw the eyes of the whole world upon this little-known region."

From The Life and Adventures of James W. Marshall by George Frederic Parsons, 1870.
Description of the Final Stage of Frémont’s March Towards Los Angeles from San Juan Bautista to San Fernando Mission

November 29, 1846 - January 12, 1847

In a first-hand account of the Short-Cut over San Marcos Pass in the Santa Inez Mountains north of Santa Barbara

December 24 - 27, 1846
The order had been issued the night before that we were to cross the mountains that day, and it soon transpired that we were to attempt the passage by a narrow path which had been used in former times when the missions were in their glory, but had of late years been abandoned. It was only a bridle path up steep ascends, and though it presented no serious hardships to foot-soldiers, and was even traveled with tolerable ease by our skeleton mules and horses, it was a road full of difficulty to our company of improvised artillerymen.

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THE MORNING OF CHRISTMAS EVE BROKE CHEERILY, for all our troubles, and gave promise of a clear day. Enlivened by the prospect of a Christmas dinner of frijoles, and possibly a fat ox from the plains around Santa Barbara, the camp awoke in good spirits at the first blasts of William D. J. Miller’s bugle.

THE FIELD PIECES WERE DRAGGED UP by ropes, and our progress was so delayed by the frequent halts where the acclivities seemed insurmountable, that the day was well nigh gone before we reached the summit of the mountain.

A COLD WIND SWEPT THE HEIGHTS, the sun went down in a bank of ominous clouds, but there was no help for it. We must pass the night on this rocky crest.
THE FIERCE BLASTS almost blew away our little fires of light Manzanita brush, and our larder was as bare as the crags around us. But we had our songs and stories for the night before Christmas, and when the bugle sounded retreat stretched our aching bones and empty bellies under the lee of the rocks, wherever a thin layer of earth or a softer stratum of granite than the rest offered a couch, spreading our tattered and muddy blankets between us and the weather.

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AT MIDNIGHT

THE HEAVENS WERE OVERSPREAD WITH CLOUDS, and the wind, which had freshened to a gale, bore to our ears the hoarse, prolonged roar of the ocean. Our sailors lay awake and listened, and predicted the roughest and nastiest kind of weather.

At morn the tempest broke. One glimpse of the great, white, wild sea was vouchsafed to those who were first up, and then the clouds closed over it and we were enveloped in mist and driving rain, and nearly caught up into the air by the fury of the pitiless wind.

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OUT FROM THE CLEFTS OF THE ROCKS and from behind sheltering crags crept the haggard and shivering soldiers at the command “fall in.”

FORWARD! but there was no forward, for the exulting gale fairly pinned us to the rocks when we essayed to move.

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OUR ROUTE LAY DOWN THE MOUNTAINS by a path almost as difficult as the ascent had been the day before. For a few moments the men stood irresolute and cowering, and then the column began to melt away and disappear in the driving scud like phantoms.

***************

ORDER AND DISCIPLINE WERE AT AN END, and every individual must fight a battle for self. Only two organizations remained intact: the artillery company, and the men detailed for the horse guard. The latter strove in vain to compel the horses and mules to face the blinding storm.
Along the slippery steeps, conscious of their danger, shivering with cold and terror, but unable to go forward. A few were led down the path and a few more followed and were then forced to go down the descent. The plucky gunners stuck to their field pieces as long as there was a chance in their favor.

But now new difficulties and dangers beset us. The hurricane raging above our heads began to form torrents and cascades along our track. The narrow mule-path we were following became the bed of a foaming mountain river, which loosened stones and bowlders and unrooted young trees in its course. Men and animals were swept before it.

For human life there was a foothold, by clinging to the face of projecting rocks and crawling up the steep gully sides; but horses and mules were actually crushed over precipices and either killed outright or crippled beyond cure.

In their half-famished state the strength of our soldiers soon gave out. Shoeless and coatless, and hugging their arms under their thin, ragged blankets, many of them sank down benumbed and exhausted wherever the rocks afforded a shelter.

The foothills were reached at last and on the first strip of level ground the sorry fragments of the now famous battalion huddled together and made their miserable camp.

By indefatigable labor and perseverance a few fires were lighted. Some of the veteran frontiersmen had led their company pack mules down the mountain, starting very early in the morning. A few other animals had been washed down the rocks and were grouped, more dead than alive, in a place of partial shelter. The rain still fell, and the wind raved, nor did the storm abate until towards morning.
ALL NIGHT LONG

men struggled into camp

those who had found tolerable shelter, where they could light fires to keep themselves from freezing, remained on the mountain side; a few had found caves and holes, into which they crept and passed the night.

THE HORSE GUARD battled all the morning with a three-fold enemy,

THE PERILS OF THE WEATHER AND ROAD,
THE OBSTINACY OF THE MULES
AND THE PERVERSITY OF HORSE INSTINCT

They were compelled, in order to save their own lives, to abandon them at last, and numbers of the poor beasts perished on the mountains.

THE GALLANT ARTILLERISTS made a desperate struggle to bring off their pieces with them, but in the final sauve qui pent [let him save himself who can] they left them high and wet, stuck fast in the perilous pathway.

The storm did not abate until after midnight, and as soon as A LULL CAME, every man that was able crept out of his place of refuge and CAMP FIRES began to show their CHEERFUL LIGHT along the rocky slope, the first PLEASANT SIGHT we had seen since entering the mountains.

BEFORE THE FIRST STREAK OF DAWN the men were mustered by companies, parties dispatched to the relief of those unable to reach camp, and AN EFFORT WAS MADE to get together what was left of our tents and camp equipage, to bring in a few beeves from the adjacent plains and to break our long fast and revive our famishing bodies.

The squads sent up into the pass to search for missing comrades were able to report the safety of the stragglers and to help them into camp in various stages of dilapidation and wretchedness, but represented the scenes along the path of our march the day before as sickening.

OVER ONE HUNDRED HORSES AND MULES WERE COUNTED, DYING AND DEAD, in the track of the battalion. Nearly the whole day was consumed in recovering baggage and bringing down the mountain the surviving animals. Every man and every company had lost something, and a great many soldiers had lost every article of personal property they owned; with the rest of the battalion, they were only too thankful to get off with their lives.
It was late in the afternoon of December 27th before the little column of tatterdemalions was again in motion, headed towards SANTA BARBARA, Distant Eight or Ten Miles.

The battalion encamped a short distance north of the ancient town, in a grove of oaks near the seashore, and did not move again until the 3rd of January.

During our encampment at Santa Barbara the boys made up for their Christmas toil and fast by keeping the rest of the holiday season in backwoods fashion—

Roaring Camp-Fires at Night

Fat Sides of Beef

With Salt to Season It,

Bread

Baked in the Ashes or Upon Sticks,

Coffee and Sugar

And even Milk

Never was good fare so keenly relished

Native Wine

And aguardiente

Were to be had in the town, but drunkenness and disorder were rare.
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