

AS SUTTER'S LIEUTENANT

Employment was an initial need facing Reading upon his entrance into California. Therefore he accepted the appointment of John Sutter as Clerk and Chief Trapper. Not only was Pierson Reading employed by Sutter, but other members of the Chiles - Walker party including Reading's close friend Samuel Hensley were also hired by the congenial Swiss. Sutter's operation was exceedingly regimented and diversified with most of the physical labor done by Indians and the skilled work relegated to American emigrants. The Indians were organized in a manner described by Reading as strict but not severe. Reading reported: "They were called in the morning by reveille, and at a certain hour the bell calls them to breakfast and then again to their labors, and such is the case with other meals, and dinner again in the evening." His evaluation of Sutter's supervision of his Indians was admiring: "They are in far better condition than in their wild state and I conceive that Capt. Souter has certainly been and is a great benefactor to this tribe of Indians."

A perusal of Sutter's correspondence with Reading indicates the diversity of the latter's position. These letters were either written by Sutter while on trips away from New Helvetia directing Reading's supervision of the fort or to Reading while he led trapping expeditions. Sutter stated:

"The Baqueros (vacqueros) have to be watched very strict...Mr. Bidwell sends his keys back to you and wish you will take care of them...Please don't forget to lock the Carpenter shop...I wish you would do me the favor and preache Mr. Neal a little economie in killing cattle and recommend him to give the vines water once a week...When you are going up to Duttons place it would be good to call the chiefs of the Eske and Machockday the 2 rancheries on But Creek and make them deliver those who are guilty of killing cattle, hogs, etc. and give them a severe punishment and make them to understand that they shall do this no more in the future... All the tribes which should show hostility of coarse you will use Arms against them that the whole valley respect in (the) future the white men more and more...I with P. Lyons don't neglect his duties by waiting on the ladys...To prevent Mr. H. so much as possible to give no grog to the people...To have a sharp eye on Chamberlain of entering in the apporment of the girls."

Because of his desire to solidify his Sacramento Valley empire, John Sutter welcomed incoming emigrants warmly and induced them to stay on his property. After an emigrant party had arrived in October, 1845 and a large portion of the newcomers had moved on to the Sonoma area to settle near American farmers in that region, Sutter wrote Reading: "I had wished to have all the emigrants settled in the Sacramento Valley; I think anyhow a good many will settle; I am sure they will not get chances near Sonoma for land like it was offered to them here in the Valley." Needless to say, many stayed with Sutter including such diversified occupational groups as doctors, gunsmith, cooper, wagon maker, carpenter, and millright.

The Mexican government was also receptive to colonization by Americans during this era. The Colonization Decree of 1828 made it possible for foreigners to obtain sizeable tracts of land simply by roughly mapping the property, applying for title and indicating intention to inhabit and cultivate it. In the initial months of 1844 P. B. Reading expressed interest in the tract of land on the upper Sacramento upon which he would ultimately settle. His companion from the Chiles - Walker party, Samuel Hensley, was working for Sutter in present-day Shasta County, cutting timber and rafting logs to Sutter's Fort. In 1852 before the United States Land Commissioners, Hensley would state that:

"In February, 1844 I was on the headwater of the Sacramento River; saw this place and recommended it to Reading. He said to give him such boundaries as I would take myself, if I wished to obtain it. I did so."

Reading subsequently made application to Governor Michetorena for the grant recommended by Hensley. Lt. James Stokes, a British officer in Monterey assisted Pierson Reading in obtaining the grant in 1844. In July Stokes wrote Reading indicating the governors permission to settle the land, with the assurance that the deeds would be forthcoming. Informing Reading that another emigrant "claims the same tract as you" and therefore, Reading ought to "take all precautions and have your possession according to law," Stokes went on to inform Reading of the current "state of excitement" in Monterey because of the anticipated arrival of an American naval force and told him: "I thank you for the hint and will have the bounds of the land made as plain as possible." In October, 1844, Mr. Reading petitioned the governor for his grant of nearly 27,000 acres. It was subsequently referred to the Mexican Secretary of State for his certification and the title granted on December 4, 1844. This document, written in Spanish, is today in the California State Library. The deed to the property was received the following year. In a letter to his brother Reading appraised the property he had obtained:

"By the chart which accompanies this journal you will find my initials marked on the west bank of the Sacramento River. This denotes my location in California. I have received from the government a large tract of land as a grant. The title is good and secures the land to me forever. The tract is in length five leagues on the bank of the river and one league deep, one league makes 3 miles, which gives me 15 miles in length by 3 miles in breadth. A more beautiful tract of land I never saw."

Reading named his estate the "Buena Ventura" meaning "good luck." In addition, Reading commented on the possibility of steamboat navigation on the Sacramento as well as the free and available labor supply already present in the two Indian villages located on his property.

Although most foreigners in California attempted to avoid involvement in the tenuous California political situation under Mexican control, John Sutter proved an exception to that rule. In late 1844, when Governor Manuel Micheltorena was facing the rebellion engineered by Jose Castro,

Sutter initiated a partisan action by placing a friend of Castro, Charles Weber, in detention under Reading's charge. He then proceeded south "with music and flying colors" to assist the governor in defense of his authority, leaving P. B. Reading in charge of Sutter's Fort, and ordering him: "Do not deliver anything to nobody, and even do not respect an order of the government, and if you see that it will be necessary, send all the cattle and horses, etc. up to P. Lassens or even further and in the case they keep me, raise all the foreigners who you can and a strong body of Indians and make a movement towards here (San Jose)." While on this unsuccessful campaign, Sutter wrote several lengthy letters to Reading informing him of the details of the march, recommending activities at the forts and assuring Reading that he knew he was "doing your utmost for my interests." This campaign ended in failure for the governor and his allies. Despite his adversities, Sutter had time to do some shopping for his young employee, informing him: "All your clothes will be ready in about 3 weeks. I bought black clothe so fine as possible for you, for a frock coat and pantolons, the same time you will receive a fine vest".

As Sutter and his men returned to the fort from their ill-fated defense of Michetorena, they encountered the arrow ridden body of one Thomas Lindsay fifty miles from their home. Shortly thereafter three Indians arrived at Sutter's Fort to confess that two tribes, including their own, were responsible for the murder as well as for the thievery of 200 horses and cattle. These Indians promised to guide a party to the rancherie of the guilty Indians if their own people would be spared. Sutter immediately dispatched Pierson B. Reading leading twenty-five to thirty white men and Indian vacqueros to punish the guilty tribe. After traveling by night three days southward to the Mokelumne River, Reading's party sighted the village two hours before daylight. A plan of attack was formulated with a simultaneous charge by cavalry and supporting fire by riflemen from concealed position. However, the plan was thwarted when an old trapper named Merritt, concealing himself behind a rock, found himself practically in an Indian hut and was discovered by a dog who aroused the camp. As a result, the men on horseback charged into the camp immediately and the surprised Indians were slaughtered as they ran from their huts. Although the women and children were spared, all the stolen horses and cattle, meat, and huts were burned. One member of the attacking party, Juan Boca, was killed.

About a month after this venture, Reading was dispatched by Sutter to lead a trapping expedition to the supper reaches of the Sacramento and into southern Oregon. Departing in May, 1845, Reading, with about 30 men, proceeded up the valley, trapping and carrying out business activities for Sutter as they passed the various ranches. One such task involved the collection of money from the famous early settler of northern California, Peter Lassen. Regarding this assignment, Sutter wrote: "I will send you P. Lassen's account with a letter for him. I wish you will be so good and settle the account with him. I think it will be an unpleasant job, because no doubt he will dispute a good many things, but you will do me a great favor to attend to this business." Apparently Sutter did not think highly of this migratory Dane, for he added: "I

will thank God when I have nothing more to do with Lassen." Sutter wrote a number of letters to Reading during this time, suggesting actions to take and describing activities at the fort. Of particular note were comments indicating "the arrival of Capt. Fremont... (who) has in all about 60 men," as well as the coming of "Dr. Sample, a man 7 feet 1 inch high," and the movement of several settlers to northern California. "Messrs Thomas, Thumb, Shard, Belden etc. are on the road coming with cattle to go up in the valley to settle." In addition, Sutter spoke of the tenuous political situation, emphasized the importance of American settlement of the Sacramento Valley for protection from the incursions of Mexican rule and asked Reading: "How much of your land are you willing to transfer to about 2 families. I think 2 or 3 miles is plenty and opined. If only about a 1000 more emigrants would have arrived, I think it would just be the proper time now to give them (Mexicans) a blow." The baron of New Helvetia even added a lament on the inefficiency of some of his employees. "It is enough to make a man crazy (crazy)," he disclosed, "when business is not better attended." During this trip, Mr. Reading became sick and Sutter sent him "one vial of castor oil, quinine and calomel," with the wish: "I am very sorry you are sick, but I hope that you will soon be well receiving this medicine."

After trapping in the valley, the party moved westward into present-day Trinity County, where Reading named Trinity River because he believed it emptied into Trinidad Bay on the Pacific. The party continued trapping for several weeks in northern California before returning with a sizeable supply of fur, much of which was sold to the Russians.

During the interval between this hunt and an expedition to the lower Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, Reading and Samuel Hensley spent ten days at Reading's grant, examining the land and deciding upon locations for fields and buildings. At this time a Frenchman named Julian was left at the ranch to build a house and the first supply of animals was sent to the premises. Thus initial, but short-lived settlement of the Reading Rancho took place in August, 1845. Subsequently Indians burned the house, killed Reading's cattle and drove off Julian.

Following the trip to his property, Reading was sent by Sutter on a trapping venture to the south which lasted from January to April, 1846. Although Reading was sick during this expedition the party continued to trap the lower Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. Problems with the duplicity of the Indian trappers faced Reading; however, he seemed to elicit the confidence of most of the men quite effectively. During this time Sutter was laying out a spacious city on the location of his sheep and hog farm. John C. Fremont and his exploring contingent were resting at the fort. The captain continued to deluge Reading with information and speculation about the political status of California. He reported an increase in the Mexican Garrison at Yerba Buena (San Francisco), adding his supposition that "No doubt England furnishes the funds (funds) to the whole expedition, and when Mexico declares war against the U. States it is sure by British influence, to keep a large part of the forces of the US occupied on the frontiers of Texas." The

additional troops Sutter later indicated was a rumor. In addition, Sutter kept on relating in detail problems at the fort, in March lengthily recounting a confrontation with three drunken emigrants he had accused of thievery. After being threatened both with a knife and insulting epithets, John Sutter confided: "What a pity to be under the necessity to be governed by the Rable, if such moments are not discouraging, I don't know what could be, if not better people is coming with the next emigration it would be better to leave the country entirely".

Reading encountered the Hudson's Bay trapping party under Michael La Framboise during this time and appeared to effect a friendly relationship with these historic California visitors. Several communications with William Leidsdorff, a Yerba Buena (San Francisco after 1849) merchant, indicated Reading had started a personal account, as well as doing the buying for the trapping party. Financial gain was accrued to Reading not only on a salary basis, but he was paid a certain percentage of the furs taken on trapping expeditions. After returning home from his San Joaquin trapping expedition and as a departing adventure while in the service of John Sutter, Reading accompanied the Captain on a thrust against the Mokolumme Indians, in early June, 1846. Sutter was incensed by an attempt by these Indians to drive off his horses, an act which he believed was incited by the Mexican Government. When the Americans reached the camp of these natives, a half day fight ensued which ended with the depletion of the Americans' ammunition. Reading, according to his commander, nearly lost his life in crossing the river before the attack on the Indians.

Permanent settlement of his property and economic independence seemed eminent. Nevertheless, great happenings were in the offing. Political events which would ultimately bring California into the United States were soon to transpire and Pierson Barton Reading was to become an active participant in those events.

As an employee of John Sutter, Reading had participated vitally in the early American settlement of California. He respected and admired the Swiss baron of New Helvetia and that esteem was reciprocated by Sutter. On one occasion Sutter wrote Reading: "You are certainly doing very well and no doubt it will continue so by your good management." Later in writing his personal reminiscences, Sutter stated: "How very different were these men (gold seekers of 1849) from Bidwell, Hensley and Reading and those I had about me before the gold discovery. The latter so inspired me with confidence in human nature, that I seemed ready to trust every sharper who came with the gold excitement." Sutter's letters to Reading contained many references to the trust and confidence the former had in the judgment of his young employee from New Jersey. However, this relationship was soon to end in the momentous events which would shape the destiny of California.