

PIERSON B. READING—THE FATHER OF SHASTA COUNTY

The first actual settlement in northern California above Tehama occurred in 1844 in southern Shasta County. The initial land grant was the "Buena Ventura," obtained in 1844 by Pierson B. Reading from the Mexican government.

To understand the man who was the first permanent settler in Shasta County, it is necessary to look briefly at the old and influential New Jersey family of Pierson and Charity Reading. The Reading family had migrated to America prior to the war for American independence. It seemed to have a talent for producing distinguished citizens. The California pioneer's great-grandfather, John Reading, was governor of New Jersey and one of the first trustees of Princeton University, while the grandfather became a well-known judge and captain in the American Revolution.

Pierson Jr. was born to Pierson and Charity Reading on November 26, 1816. His early education was typical of the existing American pattern. His school copy-book, dated 1826, contained such traditional maxims as: "Repent of your sins," "Attend to instruction," and "Avoid all evil company," written in a bold and flourishing hand.

However, when Pierson Jr. was very young, the family's good fortune seemed to decline. At the youthful age of 14, Pierson left the family circle and migrated to the south to become a cotton broker. Misfortune, which included the disappearance of his partner with \$60,000 and the death of his young wife, prompted Reading's decision to migrate west in 1843.

As a member of the Walker-Chiles party in 1843, and later as clerk and chief trapper for John Sutter, Reading investigated the northern reaches of the Sacramento River. His investigations apparently had a telling effect, for in January, 1844, Reading wrote his brother that northern California possessed "an atmosphere so very pure and mild that belious diseases are entirely unknown . . . skies which vie with Italy so cloudless and serene and . . . soil which gives a greater yield than I have ever known in any part of the United States."

A desire for land in this area was further encouraged by Reading's close friend Samuel Hensley, who had been engaged in cutting down trees in the northern California forests and floating logs down the Sacramento to Sutter's Fort. As a result, Reading assumed Mexican citizenship in 1844 and applied for a 26,633 acre grant along the west side of the Sacramento River. When Reading received this land, it covered an area extending from Salt Creek on the north to the mouth of Cottonwood Creek on the south, and was approximately fifteen miles long and three miles wide.

During 1845-46 Reading inspected his grant and built the first building of logs. In 1846-47 he was active in the conflict which wrested California from Mexican control. At first a lieutenant of artillery, Reading was subsequently named Paymaster of the "First California" Battalion with the rank of major. He was authorized by John C. Fremont, commanding the American force, to "issue due bills in making settlement with such troops as shall be discharged from the service." His wife later asserted that these accounts were so well kept that the War Department described them as "the best sent in during the Mexican War."

At the conclusion of hostilities Reading took up permanent residence on his rancho. He rebuilt an adobe house, restocked the farm and planted a variety of crops including cotton, pears, grapes, olives, grain and vegetables.

However, this rural tranquility was interrupted in 1848 when Reading discovered gold on what became Reading's Bar in Trinity County, as well as on Clear Creek in future Shasta County. As a result of his prospecting in this area, Major Reading stated that he "found the bars rich in gold," and immediately "outfitted an expedition for mining purposes." This find led to extensive mining operations on the part of Reading on the Trinity River, and brought an influx of gold seekers into the region during the next few years.

Pierson Reading contributed much to the subsequent development of this area. In February, 1850, his rancho was designated the county seat when Shasta County became one of the original twenty-seven divisions of the State of California. Shasta County then encompassed the entire

northeastern portion of California. In April, 1851, the county seat was moved to Shasta in the western part of the county.

That he was acquainted with the inner workings of California's introduction to statehood was apparent in a letter to Reading from Lewis Dent, postmarked House of Delegates, Monterey, September 11, 1849. Dent advised Reading that "a number of your old acquaintances arrived at this place . . . to participate in the honorable labor of drafting a Constitution for California."

The result of this widespread acquaintance was demonstrated in June, 1851, when Reading was nominated on the Whig ticket for governor. Requesting Reading's candidacy, R. N. Wood described the Major's name as "a tower of strength," and his character such as would "draw around it the good and virtuous." However, the extent of this admirable following did not prove wide enough to secure his election, for Reading lost the governorship by approximately 300 votes. An interesting comment on this election was later made by Reading's wife. She claimed that a few years after the election a man who had destroyed 1,000 Whig votes told Mr. Reading of the fact, adding that: "If I had known you then, I never would have done it."

The Shasta pioneer was requested to run again for the same office—by the American Party in 1855, both the Democrats and American Party in 1861, and the Democrats again in 1867. He turned down these requests. His lack of desire for a political position is exhibited in a letter to Reading written during his candidacy for governor in 1851. In August of that year a Whig supporter, John Wilson, chided the Major, saying that fear of a Whig defeat was widespread because of "the action of your opponent and the want of it on your part." This is not to presume that Reading was devoid of a sense of public responsibility, however. In declining the nomination of the Democratic party in 1861, he confirmed his loyalty to the nation by opposing the Democratic stand against President Lincoln and his desire to preserve the Union. Reading declared that "I can see no reason why I should not wish to see our Union maintained."

Following his unsuccessful candidacy for governor in 1851, Reading appointed William Magee as surveyor of his ranch and agent to sell or lease tracts of land. By this time he was described as "raising wheat and pumpkins in abundance," and had become a prosperous farmer who could afford to pay \$1,500 to a Cottonwood doctor for "surgical attendance rendered him in care of a fractured leg."

In 1852 the first army installation in the area was built. This army post, located on Cow Creek, was intended to serve as a defensive center against the Indians. It was called Ft. Reading in honor of the Major. Also during 1852 Reading presented his claim for the rancho which he had acquired under Mexican rule. His claim to a California Commissioners Board was upheld and affirmed by the state Supreme Court after an appeal to that body in December, 1852.

In 1855 Reading received an appointment as Special Indian Agent from Thomas Hensley, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at San Francisco. This position authorized Reading to act for the "Cow Creek and Cottonwood Indians and those in the vicinity of Shasta City." At that time the "Buena Ventura" contained two Indian villages on its premises and its owner espoused a policy of kindness to the natives. He had previously declared his desire to "convert them (the Indians) into useful subjects and improve their condition."

In the same year, Major Reading had completed a nine room addition to his adobe. This home merited the title of the "Reading Mansion." The house was described by the Red Bluff Beacon in August, 1858, as a "massive adobe, plastered and whitewashed on the outside and hard finished on the inside." This account added that: "As one approached the rancho it appears like a small village with its ten whitewashed buildings." Reading's daughter Alice later described her girlhood home in detail as:

In a group of oaks . . . three miles east of Cottonwood. A white picket fence around the house . . . double doors opened on a spacious hall to doors which opened to a view of the Sacramento River . . . ingrain carpet on the floor, a round table, a sofa, rocking chair, red, yellow and blue curtains and a round gilt clock . . . the adobe walls were one and one-half to two feet thick.

The purpose behind Reading's expansion of his living quarters was probably his preparation for bringing a new bride to the premises. This marriage, which took place in March, 1856, was to Fannie Wallace Washington of Washington, D.C. It was the beginning of a marriage of twelve years and five children, terminated by the Major's death in 1868.

The period between Reading's marriage and his death was characterized by his rapid increase in wealth and the use of his rising fortune in various local investments. Navigation of the Sacramento River north to a point on Reading's property had been a special interest of the Major's since 1854. In that year he had sponsored the sending of the steamer "Belle" through the rocky narrows of Iron Canyon, located on the Sacramento between Red Bluff and Anderson. Contingent upon the success of river navigation was the town of Laton (probably the present Latona district), laid out for Reading in 1857 by William Magee. This prospective city was surveyed and plotted near the mouth of Clear Creek on the Sacramento. Also in 1861, Reading was granted the honor of election to the committee to make arrangements for the Pacific Coast representation at the World's Fair in London during the following year. As previously mentioned, the Shastan was also requested to become a candidate for governor in 1861. This request he declined.

In December, 1861, Reading signed an agreement with the California Steam Company to "make the Sacramento River navigable to Clear Creek for steamwheel steamers and barges during the entire year." This agreement was made so that passengers of the California Steam Company to Red Bluff could be sent on to "a town named Laton and other places above." Both Reading and the company agreed to share the purchase of the steamboat, the "S. A. McClellan," for that purpose. To support this business venture, William Pierce and W. H. Denison issued a statement on January 6, 1862, to the effect that "the steamboat 'Rainbow' (formerly the 'McClellan') made the run from Red Bluff to Latona and back to Red Bluff in thirteen and thirty/sixty (13½) hours without the use of lines or rubbing banks."

Early in 1862, Mr. Magee was engaged in plotting another town for Major Reading. This village of 400 acres, to be named for its owner, was located on the west bank of the Sacramento "commencing at the mouth of Spring Gulch and extending back eastward from the river a distance equal to the grant and said river." Magee was also commissioned to "effect sale of lots and act in general as agent in all matters appertaining to the town."

It is apparent that both the ventures in river travel and city founding failed. There is no record of the settlement of either town. The city of Reading is not to be confused with the town of Redding which would appear in 1872 as a result of the coming of the railroad. The difficulty of ships plying the river past Red Bluff was probably the principal cause of the failure to bring about regular steamboat travel.

Reading's success as a farmer was not diminished by his business setbacks. In 1862 his rancho was awarded recognition for being the best stock farm in California (Limited). Limited prosperity accompanied this agricultural success, for the assessment of Reading's property for the fiscal year 1861-62 amounted to a little over \$50,000. The bulk of this wealth was in land and animals. Pierson Reading also derived income from the sale of property as well as from fees charged those searching for gold on his ranch. A miner was charged \$5 for the right to work on the mineral lands owned by Reading for a period of one month.

Life as the pioneer settler in Shasta County did not assume the thrilling aspects often attributed to life in the early west. The journal of Fannie Reading reveals an existence marked by monotony. The daily routine was pleasantly interrupted by visits from some of the few neighbors of the Readings—the Elias Andersons, the William Leans, Dr. James Winsell and the Sheldons of the Balls Ferry district, and the Bells of Clear Creek. Occasionally friends from a greater distance stopped at the "Buena Ventura"—men like John Bidwell and Sam Hensley.

Letters from the east were joyously received and holidays marked times of special happiness for this pioneer family. Major Reading was gone much of the time, usually on business trips to Cottonwood, Shasta City, the Bluffs (Red Bluff), and sometimes as far away as San Francisco. Transportation north and south was aided by the fact that the ranch stood on the first post and public road which went north to the town of Shasta. Sickness also seemed to play an important

part in the life of the family. The little daughter Jeanette was frequently afflicted with what Mrs. Reading described as "the chill," and took regular medication for this distress.

Reading died in May, 1868, at the age of 51. The rancho that he had developed in Shasta County was described seven years after his death as "rich bottom land, principally adapted for grazing and grape growing . . . and selling for about \$7 per acre." The disposition of the estate unfolded an episode of frustration and eventual loss to the wife and children. After a number of years of litigation (until 1871), most of the acreage of the "Buena Ventura" was sold at auction, principally to cover a \$34,125 debt to the estate of Pierson Reading's old compatriot—Samuel Hensley. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Reading and the children returned to live near her family in Washington, D.C. Ultimately two of the children, Alice and Robert, returned to live in Shasta County.

As the first citizen of the county, Pierson Reading acted as a gentleman of high character and achievement. The historical Hubert H. Bancroft described him as "a man of well balanced mind, honorable, energetic and courteous," while his friend John Bidwell declared that Reading "enjoyed the reputation . . . of being a highminded and outright citizen." In an obituary to the Major on May 29, 1868, the San Francisco *Daily-Examiner* ascribed to him a very important place in the history of California as a man who deservedly enjoyed the "highest reputation as a man of worth and integrity."

Today the only evidence of Reading's once prominent rancho is the rapidly disappearing ruins of the adobe built in 1847, and marked by a California State Historical Marker dedicated in 1968. About a mile from this location is Major Reading's grave situated on a knoll overlooking a section of the land that used to encompass the "Buena Ventura."