The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party and the California Revolt of 1844

When the men of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party reached Sutter's Fort in mid-December 1844 they thought their 2,000 mile journey from Missouri was almost over. Joining the six members of the party who had reached the fort on horseback a week earlier, they planned to get supplies and go back into the Sierra Nevada to rescue the rest of their party. But it didn't quite work out that way…

The 1844 Revolt

In the Fall of 1844, Alta California was in a political upheaval. The former governor of Alta California, Jaun Bautista Alvarado, was plotting to depose the current governor, Manuel Micheltorena. Alvarado was joined in his plot by another first-generation "Californian", Pio Pico, to unseat Micheltorena and send him back to Mexico. As Brigadier General, Micheltorena along with Comandante Jose Castro had been sent to Alta California in 1842 by Santa Ana to bring order to the territory. He was appointed governor and Jose Castro was charged with collecting taxes for the Mexican government. The "army" he brought with him was comprised mostly of convicts who had been let out of prison, and they wreaked havoc on the citizens of both southern and northern Alta California, raiding ranchos – committing robbery and torture. Before long, Alvarado and Pico suspected that John Sutter and Micheltorena were plotting to take control of Northern California.

Sutter was between a rock and a hard place. In 1840 he had obtained a huge land grant of over 48,000 acres from Alvarado in exchange for a certain condition. First, he had to become a Mexican citizen. And then he had to settle inland, away from the coast which was occupied by native Californians. By forcing Sutter to settle inland, Alvarado expected him to act as a buffer to British and Russian fur trappers from the north and be a deterrent to emigration from the east. And Alvarado also wanted Sutter to take control of the "Indian problem" in the inland valley. But it quickly became apparent that Sutter had his own plans – he wanted to exert his own control over this new land.

When Sutter got wind that Alvarado and Pico were plotting to overthrow Micheltorena, he knew his own plans were in jeopardy. He feared that a new government would seize his lands, and worse, imprison him in much the same way that foreigners had been treated in the Graham Affair of 1840. He quickly met with Micheltorena to inform him of the plot to unseat him. As a result, Sutter entered a contract with Micheltorena to render military assistance whenever he needed it. In exchange Micheltorena agreed to give Sutter and all other settlers in the valley titles to their lands and bear all expenses connected with their service. Sutter was given "general orders" by Micheltorena to raise an army, and in mid-December 1844 he began organizing a militia.

Arrival of Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party Men

The timing of the arrival of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy men at Sutter's Fort could not have been worse. While it is uncertain why they joined Sutter's army, it is highly likely that they were simply conscripted under Micheltorena's orders. They were probably promised land for their service, which also may have motivated them to participate in what they believed would be a short-lived conflict. Over half of the party was still stranded in the Sierra Nevada. Time was of the essence.

After some brief training and preparation at the fort, the "conflict" began at the end of December 1844. Sutter marched south with his army and joined Micheltorena' s forces at the Salinas River. They then marched north to San Jose to capture Jose Castro, who had become disillusioned with Micheltorena and joined forces with Alvarado and Pico. But they were too late – Castro had already fled. Micheltorena and Sutter headed south in pursuit of Castro and Alvardo and camped near San Luis Obispo.

Faux Engagement

It didn't take the men of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party long to figure out that this campaign in which they were engaged "had no teeth." Much of the time was spent drinking wine, eating, and antagonizing the local citizenry. Desertion was rampant on both sides, and it was not uncommon for officers and enlisted men to approach the opposing force and "recruit" them to join their side. And it wasn't until mid-February 1845 that any actual battles took place.

By late January most of the men of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party decided it was time to rescue their families. After all, they had left them in the Sierra Nevada with only minimal provisions, thinking they would be returning shortly after reaching Sutter's Fort. They knew their families were now in dire straits. Whether they asked permission to leave, or they simply left on their own accord, they headed north to Sutter's Fort.

Shifting Focus Back to A Rescue Mission

Not all the men left Sutter's army at that point. Sutter had appointed Dr. John Townsend his aide-de-camp. Townsend would remain with him throughout the campaign and would play a key role in delivering Sutter's "marching order" papers to Alvarado and Pico. These papers would be pivotal in convincing them that Sutter was only acting on orders from Micheltorena, and thus they let him retain his lands and official offices. But as Sutter would later write "My object in aiding Micheltorena in this campaign was to strengthen my position with the government and to secure good land titles and protection for the immigrants." He was a shrewd character.

The revolt finally ended with the Battle of Providencia at Cahuenga on February 22, 1845. A lot of blustering took place, and other than some cannon fire back and forth, nothing really happened. The only casualties were a horse, a mule and one broken wagon wheel. Surrounded by Alvarado's troops, Micheltorena finally surrendered and was allowed to go to Monterey to

collect his belongings. He was then put on a ship back to Mexico. Sutter was actually arrested, but shortly set free by Alvarado. He would be accompanied back to Sutter's Fort by Dr. Townsend. Pio Pico was quickly elected governor, but his reign was cut short by the U.S-Mexican war a year later.

Some members of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party stayed on with Sutter through the conflict. John and Dan Murphy were captured near Santa Barbara and were seen heading north in ragged condition. And James and Bernard Murphy would participate in Sutter's one "day in the glowing" sun at San Buenaventura.

A Futile Exercise

For the most part, the revolt of 1844 had been an exercise in futility for all involved. Marked by drunkenness, desertion and disorganization, the whole campaign was just one more chapter in the amazing journey of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party. It shows how for over a year they overcame one obstacle after another through perseverance, bravery and ingenuity – and opened the west.