

Narrative of
William Fitch
and
Blas Piña
Taken on board of
steamer M.S. Latham on
her voyage from San Francisco
to Donahue
[transcribed by Henry Cerruti]

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Narrative of William Fitch

My name is William Fitch. I own a vineyard and fruit trees that produce enough to allow me to live with decency. I'm the son of maritime Captain Henry D. Fitch, originally from the State of Massachusetts. He arrived in San Diego on his ship in 1822, at which point he fell in love with Miss Josefa Carrillo, who returned his love. Governor Echeandía was opposed to their marriage. With the help of Pio Pico, Henry took Josefa aboard his ship and went with her to Callao, where they were married in the metropolitan church. After being married, the newlyweds returned to Callao, from which point they set sail for San Diego. They brought a cargo of Jiangsu silks (very few), cloth, clothing, gunpowder, oil, wax and various other sundries with them. Said cargo was unloaded in San Diego, where my father had the good sense to open a shop where he stocked all he had brought from South America. Loading his boat with tallow, blubber, and countless leather hides, he dispatched his boat under the command of his first pilot, who returned to San Diego sixteen months later, bringing an assortment of American goods.

My father, Captain H. D. Fitch, died in San Diego on June 20, 1849. He left behind seven legitimate sons and four daughters, of which one daughter died in 1850; another daughter died in 1854. My older sister [Josephine Fitch, 1837–1914] married John Balash [John Nicholas Bailhache, 1828–1902], who was born in North America to French parents. She and her husband still live in the Russian River area, where they own homes and land. The American John Grant married my second sister. [Isabella Fitch, 1843–1861] However, my second sister died, and he courted and married my younger sister [Maria Anita Fitch 1848–1933]. They both live in the Russian River area, where they are well off.

Carrillo Family

The Carrillo family is from San Jose del Cabo. One of the daughters [Francisca Maria Felipa Benicia Carrillo 1815–1891] married General M. G. Vallejo, former landowner of Petaluma and Sonoma. He was a very powerful man before the arrival of the Yankees. He was celebrated for owning a good library but not well liked by those of the lower country, called “los abaqueños.” They considered him too aristocratic on account of his land. Another daughter [Maria de la Luz Eustaquia Carrillo, 1814–1890] was married to Captain Salvador Vallejo, who was celebrated for his battles with the Satiyomies Indians. He was known throughout the state as Zampay’s victor and as someone who loved fighting bears. He wasn’t arrogant; he was someone who loved to fight, but was generally loved by all. Another daughter by the name of Ramona [Maria Ramona de Luz Carrillo, 1812–1886] married Captain Romualdo Pacheco, a member of the Army and a man of great

esteem. He was killed by Avila, a Californio, who shot him in the heart.

When asked if he remembered any more details about the life of Captain Romualdo Pacheco [1795–1831], he said that he did not remember anything else, but that I would do well to visit his mother, Mrs. Josefa Carrillo Fitch in Healdsburg, who would be pleased to meet and to share any facts that she can remember. I'll add that my uncle is here, and he is able to answer questions and elucidate any matter.

What the uncle knows

My name is Blas Piña, and I own a ranch in Mendocino County, where I live with my family. I'm the son of Lazaro Piña, an Officer of Merit who died in the battle of Cerro Gordo, a fatal day for my countrymen (back then), due to the fact that they succumbed not to the courage but to the astuteness of the Yankees. I was born in Monterey, California on February 9, 1823. I'm not a well-educated person. When I was young, the schools were bad and few and far between; they were also only open four months per year. Some schools had secular teachers, and in others—and those were the best—the priests were the teachers. Instead of teaching their pupils, many of the teachers in the secular schools made the students do housework. Sometimes they would send the students out to collect firewood, and sometimes they would send them out for water. In San Rafael, there is a small plant underground used for soap and washing up. Instead of watching over the kids at school and teaching them grammar and other useful things, the schoolteachers would send the pupils to search for amoles (the name of the plant I'm referring to). When they had a large quantity,

they would sell it for money and would exchange it with the ranchers for fine soap or lard. At one time, I don't remember exactly when, there was a Mr. Hartnell [William Edward Petty Hartnell, 1798–1854] who was associated with an altar server named Short. Short was also an enlightened man who had been exiled from the Sandwich Islands by the king of the Kaulios. He opened up a school for wealthy youth in Monterey [El Seminario del Patrocinio de San Jose or Colegio de San Jose, 1833]. This meant that the teachers were very good, but there were few pupils. They decided to close the school. After the closure of this educational establishment, people with resources sent their children to be educated in the Sandwich Islands. There was a good education there, and the French consul, at the plea of Governor Juan B. Alvarado—who was, without a doubt, the best patriot that Alta California has ever produced—took over the interests of the young Californios who came to him for advice and protection.

I am the first Californio that the Yankees took prisoner. This was upon the arrival of the adventurers who were later known as “bears.” The name was given to them because, after taking the two Vallejo brothers, Colonel Victor Prudon and the American Jacob Leese prisoner in Sonoma, they took a woman's petticoat and painted a bear upon the fabric. (The bear was so poorly painted that it looked more like a pig than a bear.) I was pasturing one hundred twenty-six horses belonging to Commander General Castro when all of a sudden, as my companions and I were smoking corn-husk cigarettes, ten Yankees fell upon us, seizing our weapons, clothing, and horses. Our captors took us upriver to General Fremont, who back then was called Colonel. After asking us some questions about the town, our culture and the living condi-

tions of my countrymen, he gave a saddled horse to each of us, returned our clothes and weapons, supplied us with three days' worth of food and gave us back our freedom. Free, we headed to San Jose, where we found the town to be calm. A few weeks later, the Americans began to take saddles and horses, and people were full of indignation. They spoke out, with the uprising headed up by General Commander Colonel Jose Castro and helped by officials Jose Antonio Carrillo, Manuel Torres and others who I don't remember. The uprising wasn't well-directed. It wasn't generally supported because there were many people in the country who sympathized with the Americans. It ultimately failed. This was no surprise because the Americans were united, and we were divided. Our people knew how to fight well amongst themselves or against the Indians; however, we were not accustomed to battling well-organized troops that were skilled in the art of weaponry and lead by strong officials—such as the mariners who headed up the strong and valiant troops who disembarked from battleships in the port of Monterey under the orders of Commander Sloat.

As far as the Indians were concerned, I remember that the Asochamais Indians lived in the Mayacamas Mountains. They were bordered to the north by the Satiyomies Indians. Both tribes were called "guapos," meaning "braves." They had repeatedly defeated General Vallejo, who had only been able to maintain control thanks to the cooperation of missionary [Chief] Francisco Solano. With his Suisun fighters, Solano stopped the Satiyomies' encroachment and guarded the entire border up to near the Mokelumne River. Solano was also the commander who defeated Zampay [chief of Yoloytoy tribe and Rancheria], the most astute, cruel Indian that has ever lived in the northern region of Alta Cali-

fornia. Taking advantage of our own discord and the arrival of the Americans, the Indians came to fight close to Sonoma, killing people and stealing horses. I won't even begin to tell about the cows they killed solely for the purpose of ripping out their hearts. The hearts were a food source enjoyed by those Indians and also by the Yuvacheas and Boqueas Indians who lived in the highlands that now form part of Mendocino County. Those four families of Indians fought amongst themselves frequently, but would band together from time to time to attack civilized people.

Food

Instead of bread, our mothers, sisters and women made tortillas. They ground the flour in metates, which were also called "three-footed stones."

Corn

The soil was plowed in some areas to plant corn. Those who cultivated small plots would cut a stick and give it a sharp point. They would use it to pierce the earth, depositing the seed in the hole and covering it with a bit of soil.

Corn was cooked in water with lime to prepare it for tortillas. The lime was found on the outskirts of Santa Cruz. Lime would peel off the shell of the kernels without imparting a bad taste. Grain was also ground in metates in primitive times, but water mills were built in Petaluma and other sites in the south in 1838. Alexander Bell's [Dr. Edward Turner Bale, 1810–1849] Petaluma mill ground one hundred pounds of grain per day. A few years later, large mills that ground up to twenty bushels were built. There were also mills built in a way that I will explain: These mills

were made up of two or three smooth stones in one part. From there, another stone was placed on top, held with a piece of iron obtained from the iron dowels aboard the ships. A rod was tied to the dowel, and there was a hole in the rod. A horsehair cord that we called “mecate” was threaded through the hole in the rod. This cord was tied to a horse, which would turn in circles around the stones, thus grinding the grain. This type of mill was called an “arrastra” or “drag-stone” mill.

Entertainment

We fought bears against bulls. We would tie the hoof of the bull and the paw of the bear together. Sometimes the bull would come out the winner, and sometimes the bear would prevail. A lot depended upon the age of the respective animals. We would take the bears from Mount Diablo, capturing them with four-strand lassos. These lassos were made of rawhide by Californio ranchers. First, the rawhide was dried in the sun. After drying, the rawhide was re-soaked; once well-soaked and beginning to smell, it was cut into thin, one-inch-wide strips. They were then woven into four-stranded braids.

Food

I forgot to tell you that in 1842 Mr. Bell [Dr. Edward Turner Bale, 1810–1849] already had a lovely mill in the Napa Valley. A certain Mr. Yount [George C. Yount, 1794–1865] had one of the same types not far from Sonoma Valley.

Clothing

Men wore corduroy cloth shoes. They also wore jackets and low-profile, wide-brimmed hats. Men would place cords of gold or silver thread around the brim of the hat. Sometimes they would use a string of beads, which we called “chaquiras” but that the missionaries called “chaplets.” When it was raining, men would cover their hat with a thin yellow oilcloth.

Men used leather wingtip boots or heeled leather work boots. They made the boots with suede or calfskin. Most parts were made domestically. They tied the upper part of the boots with fastenings made of silk-woven ribbons of various colors. They used shoes called “del veruchi” and another type called “big shoes.” The shoes called “veruchi” were tied on the outside, and the “big shoes” were tied in the center of the foot with thin straps or with cords.

There were also men who wore shorter pants that reached only to the ankle. These pants had a six-inch slit that was open on the outside where men would place silver or metal buttons according to their means. These short pants had a fly with a buttonhole that was closed up with a beautiful silver or copper button, based on the wearer’s wealth. Wealthy people’s buttons carried a stamp of the Mexican eagle. Pants were tied with a beautiful silk or crepe sash and tassels of gold or silver thread. The ends of the sash were worn either one on each side or both on the same side, but never in the center. Men also wore sleeves of blue, brown or black fabric, with silk or velvet sleeve openings. Silver or gold thread was sewn around the opening. Men had braids like the Chinese, but they didn’t add false hair. In 1840, they began to stop wearing the braid and adopted the look of short hair. The back of the hair was cut

very short, and the front part was left very long. This hairstyle was called the “fury” haircut.

In the past, women wore their hair in a single braid, and then they began to wear two braids. When wearing one braid, they would twist the hair in the center of the scalp, calling it a “chignon.” They kept the chignon in place with an antler or tortoiseshell comb, based on their means. I remember that Mr. Fitch brought back four women’s hair combs made of pure tortoiseshell from one of his journeys to Peru, and he sold the combs for six hundred pesos each. One of the combs was sold to Jose de la Guerra y Noriega, a retired captain, who gave the comb to his wife as a gift. She was the daughter of Mr. Raimundo Carrillo. Another was bought by Mr. Mariano Estrada, and another by Mr. Joaquin Maitorena—who was shortly thereafter chosen to be a member of congress—and I think Mr. Vallejo bought the last one. Some women wore petticoats, and others wore tunics. They covered their shoulders with silk or linen shawls. The shawls came from Mexico and also from Peru; they were six or seven feet long and two or two and a half feet wide. They would place the center of the shawl on top of their head, and wrap the ends around the shoulders, with the right corner to the left and the left corner to the right, thus crossing them and covering the mouth. Poor women wore petticoats and a dress over the petticoats, plus a scarf upon the shoulders. The fabric covered their chest, and they would secure it with brass pins or even fish bones. Women wore low sandals called “chanclas,” and they wore closed-toed shoes in winter.

Food

Women milked the cows and made both aged and fresh cheese. Fresh cheese was called “asadero” and made in the form of a circular tortilla, but much thicker. (*illegible*)

Men planted corn, potatoes, beans and grains. Most only planted enough to feed their families, but those who ran the missions cultivated large swaths of land with the help of the Indians. Their produce was sold to the Russians or to ship captains.

Manufacturing

There were factories that made striped—as well as black and white chevron-print—serapes in Petaluma, San Jose, Santa Clara and the other missions in the central part of Alta California. The fabric was woven from tree husks and roots. Hides were tanned with green oak bark, a tree that the Americans call “live oak.” The oak stays green year-round. Hair combs were made with cow horns, and reins were made with horsehair. Cow tails were used to make rope and reins.

Cattle

My workers and I killed 1,300 cattle in 1843 on Captain Fitch’s ranch. Some meat was made into jerky, and some was ground. The tallow was sent to the States in the cow stomachs or bladders, and the fresh horns were then rolled into the ground so that they could bend and be pierced with an awl, leaving them with only one opening near the scruff. Butter and fat were put inside that hole. These horns filled with lard were called “boots,” and that’s why the ship captains would write, for example, “I received these many boots, etc.” when signing off on their bill of lading.

The mists of Donahue thus appeared, and our conversation was interrupted.

Enrique Cerruti

April 16, 1874