

Paul Sweet, a Live Oak Legend

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 by Phil Reader

When Paul Sweet died on Jan. 21, 1890, men around Santa Cruz leaned on bars and stood on street corners reminiscing about the man they called the "pioneer of pioneers." Even in an era when many early settlers remained, Sweet was recalled as a living legend.

Reviled by some, championed by others, Sweet "was considered rough, bluff and eccentric," according to one obituary, "yet he was large hearted, generous, and possessed immense force of character." All agreed he was an exceedingly eccentric man who lived much within himself.

The son of a Rhode Island whaling captain, Sweet followed his father to sea at an early age. But before long he grew tired of the life, and jumped ship at Monterey in May of 1840. He settled in Villa de Branciforte, never looking back to home or family.

He went to work at Isaac Graham's sawmill in Zayante, though his independent spirit soon manifested itself. The two men never got along, and in 1843 Sweet went into business for himself, opening the first large-scale tannery on Rancho San Agustín (present day Scotts Valley).

A strong man and quite handsome, Sweet cut a dashing figure at the fandangos held in the villa. He rapidly became a favorite among the young ladies in the region, some of whom came from leading families around the state. One of them playfully addressed him as "Sweet Paul."

From the East Coast to the Life of a Vaquero

Sweet happened to meet "Don" Alejandro Rodriguez, a municipal officer at the Villa de Branciforte, at the Rancho Encinalito del Rodeo (in present day Live Oak). Don Alejandro invited Sweet to come live at the rancho.

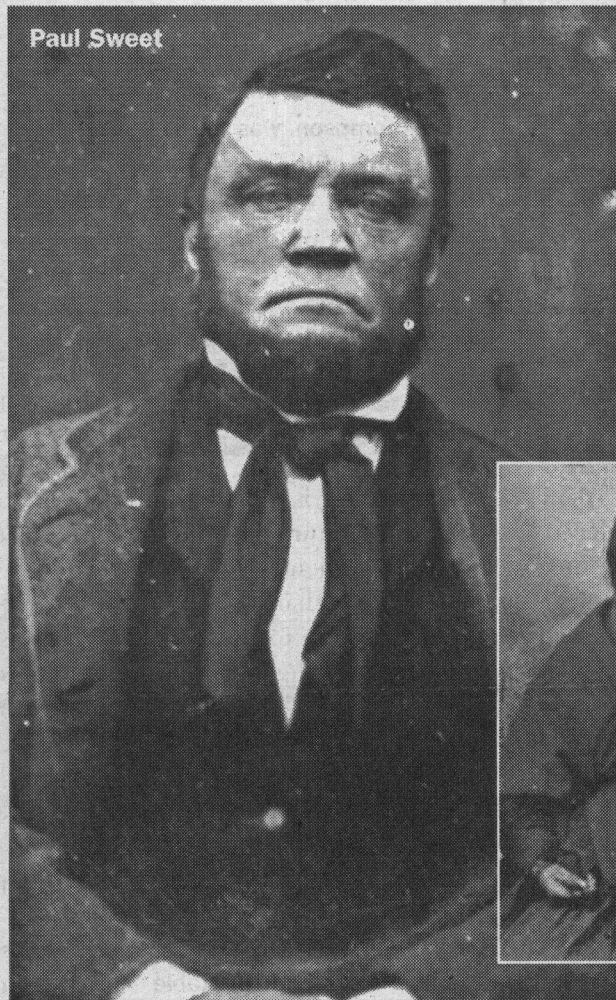
There Sweet lived like a vaquero, carrying a long Mexican knife and snapping a loop with the best of them. He spoke Spanish, became a Catholic, and wore calfskin clothes and leather boots. For all practical purposes he had become a native Californio.

In 1846, he joined in the rebellion against Mexico and enlisted in John C. Fremont's California Battalion. A natural-born fighter, Sweet took part in the Battle of Olompali, and later marched south to Los Angeles to witness the final engagement of the war.

Yet Sweet had no love for Fremont or his cause. He went with the Battalion rather as a lark. Possibly his anti-authoritarian streak chafed under Mexican rule, but his affinities lay more with the Californios than with his native countrymen from the expanding USA.

With the fighting in Los Angeles over, Sweet spent most of his time courting the young women of the pueblo. He helped one in particular run her bakery until his tardiness from duty became intolerable to Fremont.

Fremont sent one corporal, then two, then three, and finally a sergeant with instructions to order Sweet back to the company. Much irritated, the fiery Sweet leveled his rifle at the scout and shouted, "If the General wants me back, tell the son-of-a-bitch to come and get me himself!" Apparently Fremont declined.



Margarita Sweet

Traveling Back to Santa Cruz

At Mission Santa Barbara, Sweet met a 13-year-old Chumash Indian girl named Margarita. So infatuated was he that he brought her back to Santa Cruz upon his return with the Battalion. Thus began one of the great love stories in Santa Cruz history.

When he married her in 1860, the white community was so shocked that the couple became social outcasts. Sweet was ostracized as a "squaw man."

They settled down at the upper end of Arana Gulch in the redwoods, along the road that now bears his name. He cleared a section of isolated land to put in crops and began raising 10 children.

The marriage had its rocky periods, Sweet at one point deciding to take Margarita back to her parents. Joining a party of six men heading south, he and Margarita left in the middle of a rain storm, arriving to find the Pajaro River flooded and swollen. They decided to cross anyway, but only got part way before all were swept off their horses by the strong current.

In a dazzling feat of strength and bravery, Margarita dove into the raging waters again and again until she managed to save all of the men. No one was more

impressed than Sweet himself. He clung to her and said "She showed pluck, wit and true womanliness. She wants to stay with me and she shall do it."

They returned to the cabin and were never apart again except for a few hours.

Sweet and the Grizzly Bear

Sweet was remembered for his quick wits in surviving an encounter with a grizzly bear. Rather than fight or flee, as others had done with limited success, he rolled into a ball and let the enraged mother simply bat him about for a few minutes with her huge paws. She soon tired of this, and Sweet emerged wounded but intact.

He was less lucky in his meeting with a huge skulking man fellow named Chancey Isbel. Most people avoided, confronting the armed and fearless Sweet, but in this case the argument resulted in knives being drawn by both parties.

Sweet suffered from several vicious wounds to his face and body, which scarred him for life. Margarita came into the city to collect him and nurse him back to health. Isbel decided not to push his luck further and left town.

Going North for Gold

During the Gold Rush, Paul and Margarita Sweet worked a placer claim on the Merced River. They were befriended by another "squaw man" named Jim Savage.

When Savage's partner was robbed of \$20,000 and murdered, Savage and Sweet went after the killers. They tracked one of them back to Santa Cruz where they hauled him out of jail and lynched him on Mission Hill.

In his declining years, Paul Sweet mellowed sufficiently that the only excitement he caused was racing horses at the oval race track near Lighthouse Point. His horsemanship was so outstanding that he seldom lost a race.

In January of 1890, aged 72, Sweet suffered a debilitating stroke and finally succumbed two weeks later. The ever-loyal Margarita buried him in a secluded cave about three hundred yards from his cabin, with a large crowd of native Americans and Californios in attendance. Only a few Anglos were there.

Margarita "keeps his grave green by diverting a little stream to it from a spring further up the mountain side," one traveler wrote. "She keeps his memory green by thinking of his kindness and gentleness to her, when to others who crossed his path he was a pitiless foe."

Sweet still lies in the peaceful unmarked spot. Margarita died nine years later, buried apart from her lifelong companion at the old Holy Cross cemetery. ■