

NEWSLETTER

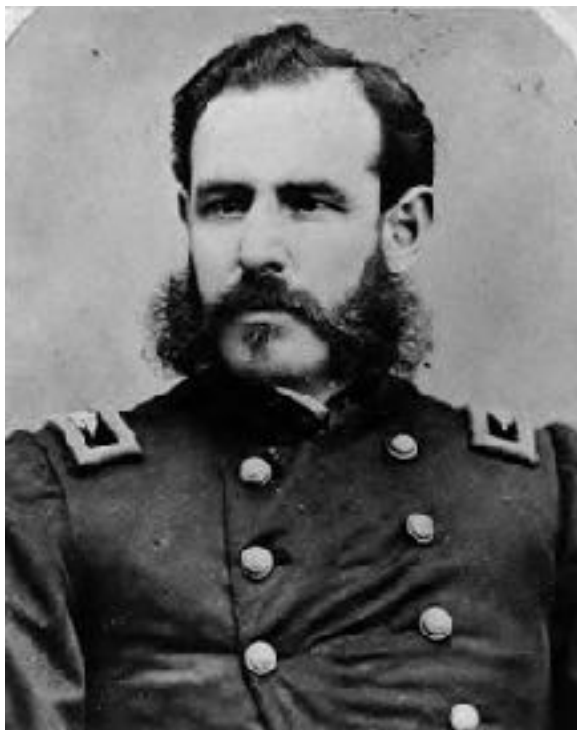
Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

July 2019

Steve Johnson, Editor

Headstone for Jose Ramon Pico

One of the prominent Mexican-American soldiers in the Union Army in California was Jose Ramon Pico, a nephew of the last Mexican governor of California, Pio Pico. Though many *Californios* (those of Spanish/Mexican descent born or living in California) had grievances against the United States because they had lost their lands and political power to the Anglos, Jose was a supporter of the Republican party and an ardent supporter of the Union. In 1863 he wrote to Governor Stanford and advocated for the formation of a company of cavalry made up of *Californios*, well-known for their great horsemanship. In February he received a captain's commission and began recruiting in San Jose, where he delivered a stirring speech, during which he said *"I have sworn to defend this beautiful flag, the Star Spangled Banner, the emblem of Truth, Liberty and Justice, and would also take*



Captain Jose Ramon Pico, who later was promoted to a Brevet Major

another oath, to guard the personal rights of each and every volunteer under my command."

In April the first 29 recruits were sworn in at the Presidio in San Francisco as Company A of Native Cavalry, California Volunteers. Eventually there were 82 enlisted men, including *Californios*, some Germans, Native Californians, and Anglo-Americans. This company became part of the state's Native Cavalry Battalion and one of only two units in the US Army equipped with lances (the other being a small unit in Pennsylvania). Company A spent much of its time around Fort Humbolt, protecting settlers from raids by the Hupa and other tribes whose lands were being overrun. The conditions here were rough for the soldiers — cold, rainy, muddy roads, monotonous — which led to some desertions. Three deserters were eventually caught and sent to Alcatraz for hard labor.

In early 1865 the company joined the battalion in Arizona Territory to protect the roads and passes from attacks by the Apaches, as well as to keep an eye on the French forces in Northern Mexico. Captain Pico crossed

Dates to Remember

- **July 4 Independence Day**
possible flag ceremony on Alcatraz
- **July 14 Board Meeting**
9:30 am on Alcatraz
- **July 16 Peninsula CWRT**
11:30 am Lecture "Battle of Drewry's Bluff"
- **August 17 Living History Day at Fort Point NHS**
10 am to 5 pm

the border into Mexico to arrest deserters and recover their horses, but was never allowed by the Imperial provincial to pursue them further. In April the Company was sent to Benicia where there were rumors of riots after the news of Lincoln's death. They were sent to a valley north of Benicia to engage with secessionists who were threatening Unionists; there was a gun battle and two cavalrymen were wounded. At the end of the war, now Major Pico retired to Alameda, where he died in 1905. He was buried next to his relatives in the Mission Santa Clara cemetery, but was never given a headstone to memorialize his service to the country during the Civil War. Thanks to the untiring efforts of Kenneth



A Spanish lancer, upon whom the California Native Cavalry was based. The lances for the California volunteers were made at the Benicia armory and had a 9-ft. shaft with an 11-in. steel triangular blade. Typically they had a red linen pennon on the base of the blade which was more than decorative; it served to soak up blood so it wouldn't run down the shaft.

Felton, commander of the local unit of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, the Veteran's Administration accepted all the paperwork he sent them and an official headstone for Major Pico will be sent to the cemetery sometime this month. A Union military ceremony will be organized for its placement, once the date is agreed upon. Descendants of the Pico family will be invited, along with the press and local politicians, and you, our faithful readers. A notice will be sent out. (N.B. Information in this article taken from the book reviewed below)

Book Review: *California Lancers: The 1st Battalion of Native Cavalry in the Far West, 1863-1866* by Tom Prezelski (Norman, Oklahoma Arthur H. Clark Co., 2015)

The history of the Americans of Mexican and Spanish ancestry in the Civil War has received little attention by scholars until the publication of Tom Prezelski's book. His ten years of meticulous research has uncovered the unusual and colorful but dedicated service performed by four companies of Hispanic men in California and Arizona during and after the Civil War. Company A (San Francisco) served in San Francisco and Humboldt County, Company B (San Jose) served around the area of San Juan Bautista, Company C (Santa Barbara) served in central California, and Company D (Los Angeles) served in Southern California. The author goes into great detail about the duties of each company, whether it was protecting settlers, chasing Confederate bandits, putting down riots and secessionist militias, or protecting the border from the Imperial Army of Emperor

Maximilian of Mexico. The soldiers suffered from a lack of supplies (often paid for by their officers), unreliable pay, miserable conditions, and sometimes from officers unworthy of their rank. And yet they persisted, and those who stayed through it all were proud to have served their new country and to have worn the Union uniform. As you read these stories you realize how these Mexican Americans quickly wove themselves into the fabric of America, and used their magnificent abilities on a horse to good effect in the Native Cavalry. It is a story that should be included in all the textbooks on California history. The book has extensive notes, an index, and a roster of all those who served in the battalion.

Board Meeting A meeting of the FOCWA Board of Directors will be held on Sunday, July 14, at 9:30 a.m. on Alcatraz, in the library. Matters for discussion are the budget, the next Living History Day, uniform maintenance, and membership. All members are welcome to attend.

Living History on Angel Island State Park In June members of the American Civil War Association spent a weekend at Camp Reynolds, putting on mock battles for the visitors. The

scenario was that the Union soldiers stationed there would have sham battles for practice, and some of them would portray Confederates invading the island. There were cannons and muskets being fired, charges and counter-charges, and music being played by the artillery band.



Visitors could also visit the bake house where bread was being baked, and could walk through an officer's house to see what domestic duties the wives were engaged in.

Photo credits: Dave Rauenbuehler



Resources

California Military Museum article on the California Native Cavalry:

<http://www.militarymuseum.org/1stNatCavCV.html>

Wikipedia article: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_California_Cavalry_Battalion

Peninsula Civil War Roundtable: <http://www.peninsulacivilwarroundtable.org/meeting-info/>