

JUN 25 1976

ON THE OLD WEST COAST

*Being further Remi-
niscences of a Ranger,*

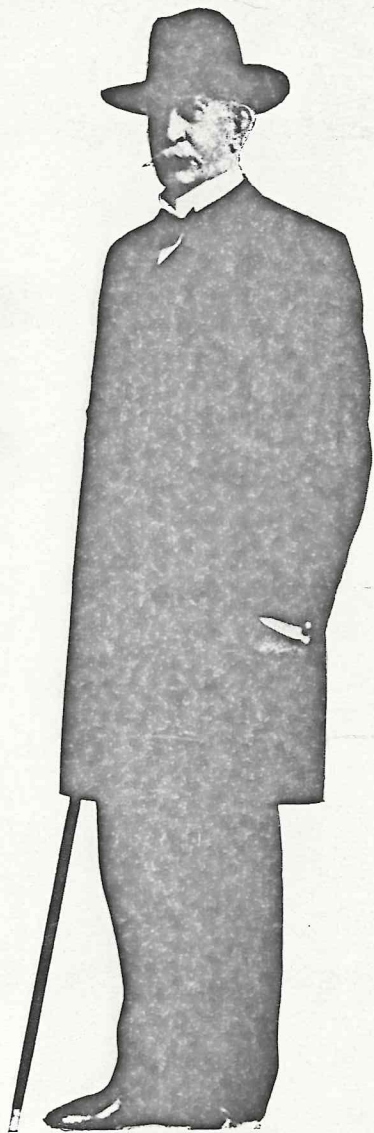
MAJOR HORACE BELL.

Edited by

LANIER BARTLETT

COPY 11

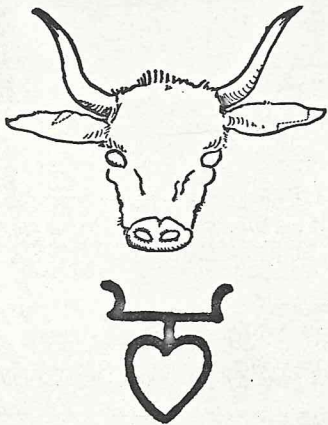
GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers New York



Major Horace Bell at seventy
years of age.

church in question, but at the last moment, after the mob was incited, he dropped out and left his pastor to do the substantial work.

Now, I knew that Methodist pastor and always thought him a pretty good fellow. I frequently attended his services and liked his Christian discourses. But what a state of affairs, when a minister of the gospel descends from his pulpit to become himself a law-breaker and murderer in an alleged vindication of decency! There is no doubt that the fellow Lachenais deserved hanging but there was a doubt that he deserved hanging for the death of Jacob Bell. At least he was entitled to a hearing before a legal tribunal, but he was given no hearing at all, even by the mob, after the Coroner's inquest.



Andrés Pico

CHAPTER 18

Leonis the Basque, King of Calabasas

THE Kingdom of Calabasas¹ is bounded on the north and east by the San Fernando Valley, on the south by the Pacific Ocean and on the west by Ventura County. Its area is larger than some of the German principalities and greater than at least one state of the United States. This is one of the loveliest regions in Southern California, even to-day after thirty years or more of devastation by the woodchopper among its parks of noble oaks. Calabasas has towering mountains, verdant slopes, shady glens, meadows, brooks teeming with trout, woodlands filled with deer, wild hogs, mountain lions and all manner of smaller game. It is the paradise of the hunter and the elysium of the surviving frontier fighter.

For Calabasas succeeded to the martial fame of El Monte as a region of tough customers. At least it duplicated the Monte's notoriety as a danger spot and on a much wider scale, mile for mile. It has been estimated that a murder marks each freehold in and around El Monte. And undoubtedly each squatter's claim and each patented freehold in the Kingdom of Calabasas is saturated with human blood. Should future farmers ply the subsoil plow thereabouts they ought to turn up human bones in astonishing numbers.

Calabasas once had a considerable population but the inhabitants killed each other off so steadily that a human face is a rarity now anywhere off the main road, and if glimpsed is usually peering from behind a great oak tree or over a

boulder, spying out the traveler, deciding whether he is a known enemy that should be perforated with bullets instantaneously or a stranger that ought to be shot on general principles as a possible disturber of shotgun land titles.

While the remaining male Calabasans are spying on each other and the stranger, the females supply the family larders by hook and by crook and also by raising poultry. Along about Thanksgiving and Christmas time it was no uncommon sight to see one of these wild hillmen herding a flock of turkeys to market in Los Angeles, one of the few occasions on which they emerged to mingle with the outside world. But precious little of the proceeds of the turkey marketing ever got back to the trusting women that had toiled all year to raise the birds and guard them from the animals of prey that infested the region, for the money was blown in at the cantinas and the sporting houses, and if the mountaineer survived to return home at all it was usually with empty pockets and a worse disposition than ever.

A squatter war raged throughout this region for thirty years or more until the name Calabasas—which signifies in Spanish pumpkins or squashes, certainly a mild designation—became a synonym for all that is ruffianly, lawless and associated with sudden death. The king of this kingdom for years was one Michel (or Miguel as the Spanish-speaking population knew it) Leonis, the Big Basque. This Leonis, known to the natives as El Basquo Grande,* started the land war in about 1870. El Basquo Grande had been born a French subject, just over the line from Spain in the Pyrenees, and in the early '50s had been a captain of *contrabandistas* or smugglers. Things were made so hot in the Pyrenees for Leonis by both French and Spanish customs officers that he migrated to America and settled in Cali-

* A local term. The Spanish word for Basque is *Vascongado*.

fornia. He was a giant in stature and strength, a perfect savage in nature, besotted in ignorance, so illiterate that he could not read a word in any language.

Still, the Big Basque was in a way a great man. He was of indomitable will, industry and perseverance, was a great business manager and became rich. When he was killed in 1889 he left a half million dollars, the most of which was inherited by the lawyers.

He first became a sheep herder in the San Fernando Valley. About 1869 he married a half-Indian woman at the head of the valley whose father was owner of Rancho Escorpión. Once married Leonis calmly squatted down on the old father's land, took the management of the property into his own hands and gradually possessed himself of all the cattle, horses and sheep of the rancho, thus laying the foundation of his future wealth.

El Rancho Escorpión bounds the Calabasas country on the north and as Leonis's herds grew he extended his dominion southward into the vales and meadows of that delectable land. It was practically all government land and the Big Basque simply appropriated it to the use of his flocks and herds without legal formalities. By 1875 or '76 his sheep numbered not less than thirty thousand while his horses and horned cattle ran into the thousands of head. By this time he dominated the whole country south of the Ex-Mission San Fernando grant, west of El Encino and north of El Malibu, a really vast domain.

All this government land was of course tempting to the new American settlers coming into California and they in their innocence supposed they could squat on it as well as could any one else. Leonis disposed of the first installment of squatters in short order: he would get criminal complaints filed against them on some charge or other, they would be

thrown in jail in Los Angeles and if they gave up their ideas of wanting to live in the kingdom of El Basquo Grande they would be let off easy, if not the charges against them would be pressed.

With his numerous Mexican and Indian retainers the Big Basque could place in the field an armed following that made him equal in power to some of the feudal barons of the Middle Ages. He was liberal in feeing his lawyers and in spending money on the elections and he dominated most of the courts. He ruled his country with rawhide, rifle, revolver and bribery. He was a tyrant pure and simple. No Mexican or Indian in the region dared oppose his slightest wish; if one did dare he was soon missing from his family circle.

About 1875 there appeared in the Calabasas region an American named Banks, an ex-Union soldier, a harum-scarum, dashing, devil-may-care fellow. He liked the country and determined to settle in it. Instead of retreating before the threats of the Big Basque he gathered around him a set of Americans who, like himself, wanted land and besides liked adventure—a venturesome, brave bunch, many of them discharged Federal soldiers.

With Banks at its head this band marched into the Kingdom of Calabasas, picked out the most likely locations and each member, according to his choice, pitched his tent or built his cabin. All were sworn to brave the wrath of King Michel to the end.

There were about thirty in this Banks party. Leonis could muster at an hour's notice a hundred armed men. And he did. The skirmishing began almost immediately. The war was on and El Basquo Grande thought that he could run the whole group out in one attack with rawhide, rifle and revolver, scorning the slower method of complaint and arrest. But so well organized was the little Banks army that when

Leonis started to eject the first settler he came to in his line of march all the rest rallied to this one's aid with a rapidity and valor that sent the bully and his henchmen fleeing from the field carrying their wounded with them.

After this a bitter, relentless guerilla warfare was carried on by Leonis. Scarcely a day passed that a settler was not killed from ambush; yet the Banks outfit held on and gradually gathered replacements from newly arrived land seekers. All this time there was no interference by the legally constituted authorities; the opposing forces were left to fight it out between themselves.

This went on for about a year when finally Michel Leonis, desperate at the sight of his toppling scepter, decided on a final grand muster and attack. The increasing number of settlers interfered with the pasturage of his great herds; he had to either diminish his stock, move elsewhere or drive the locaters out. So the King of Calabasas sent a message to the untitled but unafraid Banks that on the coming Sunday he was going to sweep the range with every man that he and his wife's family could muster; that this was to be war without quarter and that the Banks ranch was the first point he intended to clean up.

But not a settler fled; every one stood his ground and Saturday night they all rallied on the Banks cabin and awaited the attack, after sending out scouts and throwing out pickets in approved military fashion. It was toward the end of the afternoon of Sunday before the Leonis army attacked. A real battle waged until dark. After two hours, during which several of the settlers were killed outright and others wounded the army of the Big Basque was routed and left the field carrying its dead and wounded.

Michel Leonis was driven from the field but alas, fate designated him the victor nevertheless. The brave Banks had

fallen, mortally wounded. He was brought to Los Angeles by some of his followers. I was called to take his ante-mortem statement, and he no sooner gasped out the last word than he died. Left without a leader the settlers became disorganized and within two weeks there was not one left in the Calabasas.

Despite representations made to the authorities no inquest was held over Banks's body, no judicial inquiry was organized, no arrests were made. Yet the battle occurred within thirty miles of the Los Angeles County Courthouse.

How many were killed and wounded in the Leonis forces was never known exactly because they concealed their losses. From one of the Banks men, Yarnell, a brother of the so-called "Apostle of Temperance," Jesse Yarnell, I obtained a description of the encounter which would indicate that the Leonis losses should have been considerable, or else Yarnell saw double. It was Yarnell who called me to the side of the dying Banks and solicited my legal counsel on behalf of the settlers. I asked Yarnell:

"How comes it that we don't hear of your having killed anybody up there in this great fight while on your side you lost so many good men?"

Yarnell answered: "Why, Major, I never killed so many men in one day in my life! I had my old army Spencer, and at every one of sixteen shots I fired without moving from behind a tree, I saw a man drop. I think we killed enough Indians and Greasers to load a railroad car."

It was six or seven years before settlers began to percolate into the Calabasas country again. But the old contest was bound to be resumed because wherever the United States Government owns good lands the American people will possess them, whatever the odds. You might as well attempt

to stop the current of the Mississippi as to keep the American people off the public domain.

The leaders of the next invasion were Sansome and Davis. Elias Sansome was a squatter from way back. He was as tall as Leonis of Calabasas, was born and reared in the mountains of West Virginia, and was the equal of Leonis in mulish illiteracy. He had started West at an early date and had squatted all over Missouri, then all over California. There wasn't a county from Del Norte to San Diego where he hadn't squatted a half dozen times; and as far as my knowledge goes old Elias Sansome has squatted on at least twenty pieces of public land in Ventura and Los Angeles counties. Now over ninety years of age, he is still squatting.

His partner, Davis, was a novice squatter; a pupil of the veteran Squatter Sansome, and the two came over from Ventura County to squat on the range of the King of Calabasas. But, my goodness, what a surprise was in store for Squatter Sansome! Always hitherto such a successful squatter! The Big Basque just hitched a team to a wagon, took along a dozen retainers, drove over to the Sansome-Davis camp, lassoed them both, tied them neck and heel, tumbled them into the wagon, kept them over night in his stronghold and the next day hauled them to Los Angeles. There he went to his lawyers and got out complaints charging his prisoners with the crime of burglary in having burglariously entered upon the domain of the United States of America, at which crime they had been detected by the loyal public guardian, Michel Leonis.

The trussed-up prisoners were thrown into jail and I was called in, as an attorney, to defend them.

Can you imagine such a charge as the above being entered and entertained in any court in the United States of America? Yet it was so entered and entertained.

Well, to continue to relate the unbelievable, one John Trafford was Justice of the Peace then and he conducted the examination into this strange charge of burglary. He conducted this examination business for twenty-one days and the attorneys for the prosecution got more free whiskey, free lunches and season meal tickets during that period than they ever saw during the rest of their natural lives. A saloon adjoined the courtroom. Recess would be declared about six times each day and there would be a migration from the courtroom via the back door to the saloon. El Basque Grande dispensed coin all the time without stint. It was a judicial bonanza and His Honor got so drunk he never got sober again until he died.

After the prosecution had rested we brought in sixteen of the most reputable and opulent Frenchmen and Basques of the county, all of whom, though in fear of their lives, testified to the evil character of Leonis. All asserted that they would not believe him on oath.

Garnier, lordly owner of El Rancho Encino, when he had testified, was asked by the prosecution: "You are an enemy of Leonis, are you not, and that is the reason you are here to testify against him?"

Garnier replied: "Yes, I am his enemy, but I did not volunteer to come here; I am afraid of Leonis and am only forced to tell the truth under oath."

"What are you afraid he will do to you?"

"I fear he will burn my house and barns. He burned my fields of wheat and barley one year."

Jean Goyeneche testified to the same effect as Garnier and related how the Big Basque had stolen one thousand sheep from him. And so it went through the whole sixteen that were brave enough to tell what they knew about Michel Leonis. The fact was brought out by some of the witnesses

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blame for the consequences. It will not be denied that the PORCUPINE has done its duty in giving the necessary warning.

SOME REMARKS

Major Bell, of the Los Angeles PORCUPINE, is one of the most invincible martyrs of this southern country. He persecutes thuds and rascals, reveals and airs the rendezvons of thieves and murderers, and is likewise prosecuted. His PORCUPINE is conducted on the fearless plan—as the old soldier fought so he writes. Would the country had more Bells and less Baldwins, Wells and Cheney's. We admire tho gentleman's pluck and honor his humane principles. He is truly one of God's noble specimen of men.—*Murietta Era.*

Horace Bell, editor of the Los Angeles PORCUPINE, has recently been fined and imprisoned for contempt of court by Judge Cheney. That is to say he told damaging truths about the contemptible court and made comments upon the public actions of its different members. For thus availing himself of the rights of an American citizen he was dragged into court, fined and imprisoned and as a result the "court" is held in as great contempt by the people as some of the black-leg members of Washington Territory courts. This contempt of court is becoming a tyrannical weapon in the hands of corrupt judicial knaves, with which to silence free speech and comment on their rascally actions. It must go along with the Chinese.—*Co-Operator.*

The people's advocate THE PORCUPINE.

Some press comments reprinted in *The Porcupine* after the editor had been imprisoned for contempt of court

candidate. in th a majority of thc was elected. H their hopes we road Commissit tures of the mo ing themselves nopoly platform

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that some years before Leonis had engaged in a lawsuit with Jean Etchemende, and knowing that Etchemende possessed certain documentary evidence locked in his safe that would be of value to him, he, Leonis, broke into Etchemende's store in Los Angeles one night. He was discovered removing the safe bodily. In the chase that followed Leonis, carrying the safe on his shoulder, ran across a large open space between Negro Alley and Alameda Street, pitched the safe over a nine-foot adobe wall and sprang over after it. In falling the safe burst open and Leonis possessed himself of the coveted papers and all of the money in the safe, said to have been thirteen hundred dollars. He then pitched the safe into the great water canal, or *zanja madre* which flowed along the western border of Alameda Street and furnished the town with water. Then he made his escape without particular hurry, having already far outdistanced his pursuers, even with an iron safe on his shoulder. To give some idea of the giant strength of this Pyreneian smuggler, seven men were required to fish that safe out of the *zanja* and get it back into place in Etchemende's store.

That's all that was done about it; they got the safe back into the store and let it go at that. Leonis got away with the documents and the swag but was never prosecuted.

It was a common thing for the Big Basque to go out on the range with a wagon, shoot down a thousand-pound steer, pick it up bodily and lay it in the wagon; and he would do this without greater effort than an ordinary man would put forth in handling a sack of grain.

The final outcome of the trial of Sansome and Davis, whom I defended through the twenty-one days above described, was their discharge. I then immediately brought action on their behalves against Leonis for malicious prosecution and false imprisonment. Fortunately, by the time

this came to trial, a competent judge, Volney E. Howard, had been raised up by the people, and after a hotly contested jury trial old Elias Sansome and his partner were actually awarded damages against the Big Basque totaling fourteen thousand dollars. This was the first setback that Leonis had ever received in his lawless, domineering career in California. It made him very, very mad. Becoming suspicious that John Lazzarovich, a rich citizen of the Pueblo, had backed the prosecution of this case Leonis assaulted Lazzarovich on the street and inflicted on him serious injury. For this I immediately brought another suit against Leonis on behalf of the injured party and actually recovered from the great man an item of two thousand dollars damages for my client. This sum was paid down by the Big Basque in twenty-dollar gold pieces and he retired to his Calabasan stronghold in sullen dudgeon. We had him on the run!

Sansome and Davis returned to their locations in Calabasas, others followed them and civilization began to press in again harder than ever on the harassed Basque. He fought back but not with the savage confidence he had before exercised. This time he waged war by driving his cattle onto and over the lands which the settlers were trying to cultivate. He forced many of them out this way because they were as yet too poor to fence their lands adequately. Finally a game young Californian, Meza, who had been made a victim of this trick, drove the Leonis cattle off to the four winds, whereupon Leonis, forgetting for the moment his recent reverses in the courts, resorted to his old method of getting his enemies thrown into jail. He charged Meza with larceny of the cattle. The courts now being out from under the Leonis influence Meza was discharged and the author of these lines once more went after El Basquo Grande with a damage suit on behalf of the falsely imprisoned Meza. Again we col-

lected gold twenty-dollar pieces from the treasure chest of the now pretty-thoroughly discredited King of Calabasas.

By this time suits had cost the great man twenty thousand dollars, which had a noticeable tendency to modify his aggressive barbarism. At the same time the settlers were mightily encouraged and the Calabasas became a habitable country.

This brings us down to the middle '80s. The tables are now completely turned. It is the squatters that have become arrogant and somewhat savage. El Basquo Grande scarcely dares to ride along the highway in front of settlers' locations but chooses the byways. A leader of the settlers has risen up, by name Harvey Branscomb. He is not averse to winning a reputation as a frontier fighter and he takes an occasional shot at the Big Basque just to show who is boss. Leonis is afraid of his neighbors now. His herds have diminished and he tries grain farming, but that is a dangerous business for a man with so many enemies for grain fields burn so easily.

Finally, in desperation over another damage suit with which he had been pestered, the shorn giant came to my office and begged *me* to defend him in court! I took the case and won it for him. So rejoiced was he at winning his first damage suit that he went on a big drunk and while driving his wagon homeward through the Cahuenga Pass fell out and his head was crushed under one of the wheels. At least this was the common report, though it was pretty well believed that he was assassinated.

This Michel Leonis had peculiar qualities aside from his savagery. He claimed before his Mexican and Indian followers that he dealt in the occult. They said he could disclose the future, unravel men's secrets, discover stolen property and foretell to a certainty rain or drought. An in-

stance which they relate of his mysterious powers, which is really an instance of a gleam of Solomon-like wisdom, is this:

There were a hundred or more shearers engaged in shearing sheep in his pens when the foreman's watch was stolen from a vest left hanging on the limb of a tree. Receiving his complaint, Leonis had all the men lined up and demanded that the thief forthwith bring the stolen watch to him. There was no response. "Very well," said Leonis, "I will now proceed to discover the thief and recover the watch." He went from man to man holding his ear down near the mouth of each as he passed along the line. But no man spoke. This done he called for a burro. Then he led the ass along the line of men, demanding that each whisper his innocence or confess his guilt into the donkey's ear. After the passage of the line and the whispering in the donkey's tall listener, Leonis led the animal aside and pretended to commune with it for a long while. Then Leonis returned to the uneasy sheep shearers and said: "Yes, one of you confessed to the burro and now I know the thief. But the principal object is to recover the watch. I will not expose the thief if he will return the stolen article. I now hang the vest back on the tree and to-morrow morning I expect to find the watch reposing in the pocket. If not I shall hang the thief on this same tree until dead." The gang was dismissed to supper.

The next morning the watch was in the vest pocket.

After the death of Leonis, Harvey Branscomb constituted himself a sort of successor to the Basque as a ruler of the settlers and more bloody trouble blighted the region; quarrels and killings revived and made it a dread country again. Then drought fell upon it, and quietude. Now it is waiting, in all its beauty, for a revival, and may its future history be peaceful and productive as befits such a naturally glorious region.