Jean Jacques Vioget the Forgotten Swiss of Early California

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What makes a hero? Do heroes exist in themselves, or only insofar as they are valuable in the folk mythology of their time? What criteria are used to label one man as an important historical personage, whose name and rank are to be noted and memorized, while a contemporary of greater personal achievement is consigned to oblivion?

These questions come to mind when comparison is made between the lives and careers of two Swiss emigres to California in those decisive years before the Gold Rush, before California became a state of the Union and a part of manifest destiny: the well-known John Augustus Sutter, and the nearly forgotten Jean Jacques Vioget.

The conquest of the North American continent, made through the westward movement of the Europeans who settled the United States, is the great drama of American history. In the process, legends were created to glorify the accomplished facts of settlement and appropriation. From the perspective of a century and more later, we can begin to see the process of selection at work when the history books were written. What coincided with European-American perceptions of themselves as a people favored by destiny, self-reliant and worthy, was retained, and whatever—or whoever—challenged those perceptions was rejected. We now recognize that the Indians saw the conquest of the West in quite another light than did the triumphant European conquerors. Perhaps we can begin to realize why certain men were accorded greater symbolic worth by their contemporaries.

This appears to have been the case with John Augustus Sutter and Jean Jacques Vioget, whose lives interacted from the year 1839, when both arrived in California, until Vioget's early death, 16 years later.

All Swiss who read American history know of the colorful Captain John Augustus Sutter, Swiss adventurer and empire builder in California, whose great domain included most of the Sacramento Valley north to what is now Yuba City, and upon whose land gold was discovered in the year 1848, resulting in the flood of gold seeking emigrants who in turn brought about his expulsion and ruin. Sutter's Fort, a reconstructed adobe near the present city of Sacramento, is presently a State Historical Monument, containing momentoes of pioneer days. It was at this headquarters that Sutter welcomed, selectively, the emigrants who came to California,
first in a trickle, then in a flood, to seek their fortune in the Golden State.

It is somehow appropriate that the few surviving personal documents left by Jean Jacques Vioget are also at Sutter's Fort. Since Sutter and Vioget embodied the contrasting virtues of the German Swiss and the French Swiss, and as their careers inter-meshed and their life philosophies differed so widely, it may be of more than academic interest to compare their lives in early California.

Who was Jean Jacques Vioget? His name occurred often in accounts of the earliest days of Yerba Buena, the hamlet which became the port of San Francisco. He is known to historians, but not to his compatriots or to the general public. Yet Vioget's talents and his contributions were varied and precedent setting: he made one of the earliest paintings of the pueblo of Yerba Buena (San Francisco) in the year 1837; a basic survey map of Yerba Buena in 1839, which provided the grid pattern on which the city was later constructed; the first modern land survey in California (for Sutter's New Helvetia grant in the Sacramento Valley) in 1840-1841; and ran the first hotel and billiard house in San Francisco (1841). Furthermore, Vioget was a sea captain and a trained naval engineer in a period when these were unusual attainments; he had travelled the world and spoke a number of languages, he was a bon vivant with many warm friendships, who chose to settle at San Francisco Bay because he was so impressed with its magnificent location. He married a California woman of Spanish descent, had two sons, made a modest fortune, practiced his calling as the first modern land surveyor in California, and became a Vigilante in San Francisco to protect public safety in the early fifties, when a criminal element had flocked to California after the Gold Rush.

But Captain Jean Jacques Vioget, who had settled in Spanish California, did not find the new California of the Yankees, with hucksters, gold miners and promoters to his liking. He told friends that he was completely disgusted with California, and would prefer to live in the Pacific Islands or India. He accepted an appointment to do some surveying for the King of Hawaii in the Sandwich Islands, and then planned to return to Europe to put his sons in school. A few days before the ship was to sail from San Francisco, Vioget was stricken by a heart attack and died. The year was 1855. Jean Jacques Vioget was 56 years of age.

Since Captain Vioget left no diary, accounts of his life and accomplishments are scattered in a number of documents and contemporary accounts. An unpublished manuscript on the life of this remarkable man was compiled by Dr. Jacob N. Bowman, retired Historian, State Archives, State of California, using all available documents. This manuscript is on deposit at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The birth certificate of Vioget lists him as the son of Jean Pierre Vioget and Jeanne Susanne Vioget of Combremont le Petit, District of Granges, Canton of Vaud (near Lake Neuchâtel), and gives the date of birth as June 14, the date of baptism June 23, 1799. The mother died in childbirth. The birth certificate lists
the baby as Jean Isaac Vioget, presumably the names of his godparents, the father's brothers, Jean and Isaac. At an early age, Vioget changed his name to Jean Jacques Vioget.

According to the Vioget family tradition, young Vioget left school at the age of fifteen, took his fife and joined a drum corps in Napoleon's army. After the fall of Paris, he was apprenticed to a naval engineer. Subsequently, according to testimony made in California many years later, he served in Batavia, East Indies, for approximately five years. Then he came to the Americas and served as a lieutenant in the Brazilian Navy. While in Brazilian service he secured a copy of his Swiss passport from the Swiss consul of Leghorn, Italy, on June 14, 1831. This listed his age as 32, gave other particulars, including the place of birth as Combremont le Petit, Canton of Vaud.

After leaving service with the Brazilian Navy, Vioget served with an Ecuadorean firm on the West Coast of the Americas. During this time, Vioget visited the San Francisco Bay in July, 1837, in his ship the Delmira. On this occasion, he painted a water color view of Yerba Buena, which is now a valuable piece of California. The painting shows Yerba Buena Cove, with the only two private houses then standing: those of William A. Richardson and Jacob P. Leese. The harbor scene includes several ships, and the one at the extreme right of the picture is depicted as flying the Swiss flag, a white cross on a red field. Judging from the skyline and the view of the hills, it is estimated that the Delmira, on which Vioget presumably painted the picture, was anchored at a spot which is now the intersection of Sacramento and Drum Streets, but which at that time had sufficient depth for sailing ships.

The original water color painting by Captain Vioget is still in existence, in private hands, and has been reproduced a number of times, more or less faithfully as a record of the growth of San Francisco and as part of California history.

In October, 1839, Vioget began his permanent residence in California, but retained his connection with the sea for the next decade. He settled in Yerba Buena, living in the Leese house for the initial period. Shortly after his arrival in the pueblo, he was approached to prepare a survey of Yerba Buena (now San Francisco). This was begun in November, 1839, and completed early in the following year. The survey and map were used for the future development of the little pueblo or town, and the blocks and streets laid out by Vioget were adopted and extended in subsequent surveys and maps of the nascent city of San Francisco. The original map of Yerba Buena drawn by Vioget is now owned by Bancroft Library.

Vioget was granted a lot southeast of Portsmouth Square, on what is now the east side of Kearny Street between Clay and Sacramento, by the alcalde, Francisco Guerrero, in January, 1840. Half of that lot may be presumed to have been his payment for drawing up the survey and map. Vioget constructed a house on this lot, and the next year, 1841, Vioget applied to the alcalde for a license to open a billiard house and hotel. There is a record of payment of "municipal duties on aguardiente and other
liquors by Jean Vioget, L44.07" in the year 1841.

From 1841-1843, Vioget and a partner conducted a hotel and billiard business in Yerba Buena. This was later sold and renamed the Portsmouth Hotel just before the Gold Rush.

In November, 1843, Vioget again went to sea, this time to Peru, and at various times during the 1840s Vioget used his ship in local trade in San Francisco Bay, primarily collecting cow hides from various missions and ranchos and bringing them to Yerba Buena for shipment.

Vioget came to prominence through his survey to prepare the petition of land grant of New Helvetia for Captain John Augustus Sutter. Sutter had also arrived in California in 1839, and the two men met in Yerba Buena in autumn of that year. At this time, apparently, Sutter requested Vioget to make the survey, which was done over a year later, in the winter of 1840-1841. This survey was the first modern land survey made in California, replacing the Spanish and Mexican usage of citing natural land marks such as streams, hills and valleys as boundaries. This older practice had been satisfactory during the Spanish period when land was available everywhere and exact boundaries were not necessary. It required a foreigner to raise the question of more precise surveys of land to determine boundaries: the American born Jacob Leese urged the survey of Yerba Buena which Vioget made in 1839, and the Swiss Sutter wanted an exact survey of his grant such as obtained in Europe.

Vioget went to Sutter's place on the Sacramento River in December 1840, or January 1841. He spent a week making preparations for field work, including making a 50 vera chain at the forge out of wire. This is the first metal surveyor's chain known to have been used in California. The other instruments were a sextant and a small ship compass with sights. There was an artificial horizon also, using molasses in the absence of quicksilver.

The survey required fifty days, and the team consisted of Vioget, who handled the compass, three white men to handle the chain and stakes, and six Indians to serve as boatmen, cooks, packers and guards. The personnel was supplied by Sutter.

Vioget kept field notes of the entire survey in order to prepare the map for petition of the land in question, eleven leagues in all. There was no Diablo Base Line for Vioget to employ; he was forced to take the sun's altitude to find fixed points of the compass. Some of these reckonings were approximate and subject to error, but the survey as a whole was a great advance for its time. It was, moreover, a major undertaking under very difficult conditions.

The survey worked north from Sutter's Landing, near the present city of Sacramento, following the Sacramento River to the mouth of the Feather River, and covered the eleven leagues requested in the grant, including the most fertile and desirable land on both sides of the Sacramento River. Maps were prepared and submitted to Captain Sutter, but the originals of these have been lost or destroyed by fire. Only certified copies of these maps are still extant.

The entire history of the survey was given by Captain Vioget some years later, when he testified in the land grant case for Sutter in the year 1855.
Besides the survey made for Captain Sutter, Vioget made others for Leese on a grant south of Mission Dolores, one for himself for a grant in Marin County, and of Bodega for a fellow sea captain, Stephen Smith. Because of his professional capacity, Vioget was called upon to testify at land grant hearings involving ownership of various rancho prior to American settlement, most notably that of John Augustus Sutter.

Although there is a small photograph of Vioget among the personal memorabilia at Sutter's Fort, more can be learned of his personal appearance, and especially of his personality, by other documents and especially through contemporary accounts.

The Swiss passport issued to Jean Jacques Vioget by the Swiss Consul at Leghorn, Italy, in the year 1831 while Vioget was in service with the Brazilian Navy, gives the following description: age 32, face round, nose straight, eyes blue, mouth large, forehead high, chin round, hair black, height five feet three inches. A second passport issued from the same Consul at Leghorn a year later provides the same data, with the exception that the hair is described as sunburned, height medium, and states that Vioget was then an ex-lieutenant of the Brazilian Navy.

It was five years after receiving the last of these two passports that Vioget visited San Francisco Bay in his ship, Delmira. It was not until 1839 that he made a permanent settlement at Yerba Buena, two years later. The house which Vioget constructed south of Portsmouth Plaza, the billiard house and hotel, soon became the social gathering place for residents and visiting ship captains. Vioget as innkeeper in the early 1840s was the subject of a lengthy account by his contemporary, William Heath Davis, in his "Seventy-Five Years in California."

The other third of the block containing the Hudson's Bay store was owned by John J. Vioget, a Swiss, who lived there, and had a kind of public house with a billiard-room and bar, which at the time was the only place of resort for the entertainment of captains, supercargoes, merchants and clerks of the town. He had also occasional visitors from the ranchos whenever they came to town to make their purchases and transact business.

Vioget's house was a sort of exchange or meeting place for comparing notes on business matters, talking over affairs in general. At the same time a little amusement was perhaps indulged in. Some were chatting, some were smoking, some playing billiards . . . .

On one such occasion, Davis concluded, Rae the Hudson's Bay Company agent, challenged a Californian named Estudillo to a contest at wrestling, to prove who was the better man. Upon Rae's being thrown five times, he treated all present to a glass of wine.

In his memoirs, Davis related that Captain Vioget had a close friend or "boon companion," one Captain Steel, who was also a sea captain, and sailed out of Boston. These were "two men who
were like Damon and Pythias--of the same disposition and tempera-
ment, always around about the same time." Steel, who was
good natured and jocular, gave Vioget the nickname "Blucher" by
which he was best known in California. Davis related the occa-
sion on which the nickname was given, a 4th of July public dinner
at Yerba Buena: "At this banquet, Steel christened Vioget as
Blucher (after the officer who saved Wellington from defeat at
Waterloo). By that title he was afterwards known on the coast,
called by it even more than his real name." In fact, when Vioget
petitioned for his land grant in Marin County, north of San Fran-
cisco, it was called the Blucher grant.

Davis is the authority for the following delightful account
of Vioget, bon vivant and gourmet, in this golden period of life
in early California.

Vioget was one of the principals in an incident of
somewhat ridiculous nature. In 1841 a Russian by the
name of Don Andres Hoeppner was employed for a consider-
able period of time by General Vallejo as teacher of
music for his daughters, at Sonoma, and frequently visit-
ed Yerba Buena. Being an excellent musician--playing
with taste and skill the piano, violin and guitar--he
was popular and well-liked, such men being much appreci-
ated by the people who had little in the way of good
music or amusements. Being sociable and companionable,
he frequented Vioget's saloon, and became a particular
friend of the proprietor.

The latter was known on the coast as a great eater,
and prided himself on the reputation. Hoeppner and sev-
eral others being in the saloon one day enjoying them-
seves, the question of gourmandizing was brought before
the company, and he challenged Vioget to a contest to
determine who was the biggest eater in the department.
Hoeppner not being known or suspected in connection with
gastronomic feats, the challenge was instantly accepted,
and a day was fixed for the contest. Invitations were
sent out to the merchants to attend. I was invited, as
were also Spear and others.

When the trial commenced, pancakes were brought on
plate after plate, and speedily devoured. Hoeppner was
one plate ahead. The next course was breakfast, all of
which disappeared as rapidly as had the other. Hoeppner
led a little on the steaks. Next was guisado, a meat
stew in the Spanish style--a delicious dish, several
plates of which were consumed. Next came asado, or beef
broiled on the spit, many plates. Hoeppner a little
ahead. After this, beans, Spanish style, large quanti-
ties of which were disposed of; succeeded by tamales,
corn prepared as before described, each of the contes-
tants eating at least a dozen. An immense pudding then
appeared, followed by pies of various kinds, which were
largely consumed. All of the food had been prepared in
the nicest manner, and made inviting, by skilled cooks--
old Jack Fuller and assistant. The wind-up was black coffee, but during the meal no drink was taken. Vioget gave out on the pies. Hoeppner, still eating, was declared the winner. All were astonished at the quantity of viands that went down the throats of these two men. After concluding their repast they got up and moved around, smoked, drank a little wine, played billiards, and appeared to suffer no inconvenience from the meal each consumed.

Vioget was of large frame; Hoeppner taller, nearly six feet in height, slender, but well proportioned. I have no doubt each of the gourmands ate food enough to satisfy a dozen hungry men. Both contestants were good musicians, Vioget playing the violin as finely as Hoeppner. The former (Vioget) was also an excellent civil engineer, and had been employed by Captain Sutter in surveying his lands. Don Andres Hoeppner's wife was a Russian lady, a pretty woman, and, like women in general at Yerba Buena, was much appreciated.

Vioget was afterwards captain of the brig Euphemia in 1848. Referring to his defeat in the eating match, he said that if he had been as young as Hoeppner the latter would not have had any show at all. He was some fifteen or twenty years older.

Vioget returned to sea to make his living after quitting the hotel and public house trade. Nevertheless, he retained his residence in Yerba Buena, which became San Francisco. A graphic account of the mature Jean Jacques Vioget dates from the latter period, when he had become a long-term inhabitant of San Francisco. Barry and Patten, writing "Men and Memories of San Francisco in the Spring of 50" some twenty-five years later, pay tribute to Vioget's talents and personal character.

In 1847 (1839) J. J. Vioget made the first survey of San Francisco or Yerba Buena, and laid out the plan for its streets. Had his design been carried into effect, it would, as a sanitary proposition, have been much better for the city's inhabitants. Every house would have had an equal share of the sun upon its front and rear during the day... Vioget's wisdom and experience sought to obviate and prevent this harmful condition of things, for he knew the value of the sun's light and heat in San Francisco, where he had lived much of the time since 1837, and noted the isothermal needs.

M. Vioget was Swiss, of French descent, like the great Agassiz, who, when speaking, always reminded us of Vioget, so modest, earnest and fascinating in conversation, always imparting some new and useful knowledge; eager as a child to gain a scrap of information; and, withal, a wonderful way of drawing from you, by no effort of your own, better things than you imagined yourself capable of saying—the most intoxicating of flatter-
ies. Vioget resided on Kearny street, west side, adjoining the old City Hotel, which formed the southwest corner of Clay and Kearny.

In stature he was about five feet eight and a half inches, and possessed a good average avoirdupois. He carried his head a little inclined, like one listening; his hair was short, plentiful and very gray; he wore a full gray "old guard" moustache, and up to the last day we saw him, he wore the old California costume—the short blue jacket and black pants. Few, today, save the old residents, seem to remember him, so reticent was his nature.... But we should be happy to think that these pages might be the means of reminding the victims of malarious ills, of rheumatism, and chills and fever, that the subject of this sketch worked for their good a quarter of a century ago, though thwarted by that hydra--politics.

Vioget and Sutter

In the winter of 1840-1841, Jean Jacques Vioget undertook and completed the famous survey of Captain Sutter's New Helvetia grant, which has been described earlier. This began an association with Sutter which continued to the end of Vioget's life.

In December, 1841, the final documents of sale of the Fort Ross colony of the Russian American Fur Company to Captain John Augustus Sutter was signed in Yerba Buena, with J. J. Vioget as witness. The documents, written in French, included all buildings, houses, livestock and firearms, including cannon, for the price of $30,000, most of this to be repaid in produce, especially wheat, within a four year period. (The wheat was needed for the Russian colonizers in Alaska, and it was the inability of the Fort Ross settlement to produce wheat which led to its sale.) It was over ten years before Sutter could discharge this debt. The negotiator of the sale was Alexander Rotchef, last commandant of Fort Ross, who re-entered the California scene and Vioget's life in an unusual fashion many years later. The purchase of the Fort Ross colony gave great prestige to Sutter, but it caused him to incur heavy obligations for years to come.

Among the few documents left by Vioget are six letters written to him by Captain Sutter, published in 1942 as "Six French Letters: Captain John Augustus Sutter to Jean Jacques Vioget 1842-1843." In the foreword of this book it is stated: "Jean Jacques Vioget was not what one could call an intimate friend of Sutter. He was at the Fort only on short occasions, spending most of his California time in Yerba Buena, now the city of San Francisco, or near San José."

The letters provide an indication of the relationship between the two men. Sutter addressed his letters several times to Captain Vioget as "Monsieur et cher Compatriote" to emphasize their common bonds of origin. One letter advised Vioget he was sending down firewood, both large and small pieces, to be credited to his account,
and asked Vioget to bargain for a cable for his launch from a visiting ship. In a letter dated February 2, 1843, Sutter stated that the beaver traps, one of which Vioget had sent as a model, weren't worth anything as they were not strong enough, but Sutter would use them for old iron to make spring knives for the Indians. Sutter continued by saying if the Good Lord gives a good crop this year, he will have enough to pay his debts, except to the Russians, "but that is different." Sutter related his triumphs and prospects in field and industry, concluding "You will excuse me if I am boring you with such a report that does not interest you very much." In a footnote to this letter, Sutter noted the return of Vioget's watch, which he had borrowed, in need of repair, and credited him with $4 for a second one.

In one of the Sutter-Vioget letters, dated August 28, 1842, Sutter complained because Captain Richardson, as port captain of Yerba Buena, had stopped the launch "Sacramento" (acquired from the Russians) because of an unpaid debt to Celis, a Spaniard. Sutter asked Vioget to bring his influence to bear "as a fellow citizen" so that such things would not happen, and he would be given credit "as to any Californian." It is recorded elsewhere that it was J. J. Vioget himself who demanded on August 20, 1842, that Richardson embargo the "Sacramento" until the debt was paid, but undoubtedly Sutter did not know this when he wrote to Vioget asking him to use influence in his favor. Sutter complained, "I suppose that there are many people who are my enemies, and I don't know why, people who are trying to hinder me and to do me harm if they can." Sutter's French became much worse when he was excited. In another letter, Sutter protested that the "Sacramento" was his, on condition he pay for it, and only the Russians have the right to take possession—"you yourself signed as a witness." Further, Sutter complained that two Swiss had come to Yerba Buena. "Why didn't they come to see me?"

Another letter noted that 10 hides were sent to Vioget on account, and requested receipt. Sutter promised to send six Indian workers downriver to Vioget. A letter dated April 12, 1843, states that Sutter was sending by Mr. Spear's boat two good Indians who knew how to make adobes (bricks from sun baked mud.) Perhaps they were used to construct the house on rancho Blucher which was mentioned in Vioget's petition for the full grant in fee. The same letter from Sutter implores Vioget: "If there is anything new, I beg you please to let me know and you would oblige greatly."

In the final letter of the series, dated June 14, 1843, Sutter wrote: "I find it necessary to beg you to help me defend my rights." Sutter was already troubled by other claimants to his fertile land, including a neighbor whom he said he had trusted and befriended. "For that reason, I beg you to aid and assist me against a rare schemer. Please have the kindness to tell him that the degree of latitude north 39°33'45" was my boundary line, and that the green numbered squares should signify only the land that doesn't flood." Sutter requested Vioget to make a second map of his New Helvetia grant, without numbers, to show to people who disputed his land grant. Sutter wrote: "I trust entirely to you to have them make some other maps that are more just." Thus the re-
corded correspondence between Sutter and Vioget closed.

International Rivalries

The stage on which the drama of the lives of Vioget and Sutter was performed was becoming more and more a world stage of international rivalry and destiny, although in appearance it was still the sleepy Department of California under the Government of Mexico. The Swiss Captain Vioget was not the only one to be impressed by the Bay of San Francisco.

William Heath Davis in "Seventy-Five Years in California" noted that in the spring of 1839 a British vessel of war came from British Columbia and mapped the entire Bay of San Francisco and the Sacramento River. This indicated that England recognized the value and importance of the Bay and its geographical position.

Davis wrote that British men of war came every year or so to Monterey and the Bay of San Francisco, staying for two to three weeks. American men of war were even more frequent visitors, and there was nearly always one in the vicinity up to the time the country became part of the United States. At this period of time, the Pacific Ocean trade was significant, with imports going to Hawaii by ship from Boston, New York, England, France and Germany with import duties of only five per cent. From Honolulu, goods were transshipped to the West Coast of the Americas, Mexican ports, California, the Columbia River, and the British and Russian possessions to the north. Vioget, for example, made a number of voyages to the west coast of South America, and between 1846-1849, approximately two thirds of the voyages were to Hawaii.

In 1841, from July to October, the United States Exploring Expedition, consisting of the Vincennes and Porpoise, under the command of Commodore Wilkes, was anchored in San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento River, where they often visited Captain Sutter. Some of the officers of the expedition were entertained at Fort Ross by Alexander Rotschef, according to Davis, who sent horses down so that they could make the 70 mile trip overland by horseback, and returned them with the same care. Davis states further that Wilkes told friends here that "the expedition was to obtain and report accurate information in regard to the bay of San Francisco to the government at Washington with a view of future acquisition."

Davis wrote "In my visit to the officers of the vessels (of the United States Exploring Expedition) the conversation in the wardroom would frequently turn upon the bay of San Francisco, and they often declared their admiration, and said that in all their visits to other parts of the world they had seen nothing to equal it. The more they became conversant with it in their surveys the more they were impressed with its importance ... and referred to it 'This is ours ... the United States Government should take possession.'"

The other world power which entered the story is the government of France, in the person of the colorful Count Eugene Duflot de Mofras, diplomatic attaché of France in Mexico. Duflot de Mof-
ras conceived of a wider sphere for France, and undertook a personal tour to the Department of California in the summer and fall of 1841 on behalf of the Foreign Minister. His report was published in France in 1844 as "Exploration du Territoire de l'Oregon, des Californies et de la Mer Vermeille." It was a superb analysis of the ports, resources, international politics and local conditions of the areas visited, and may properly be considered as a quest for colonial possessions, to connect with the acquisitions of the Marquesas and other French Pacific holdings. Duflot de Mofras expressed the belief that the Spanish population, not sympathetic to the British or Americans because of religion, customs, language and culture, would welcome the French more than the others if another major power took over California.

When Duflot de Mofras reached Monterey in the spring of 1841, it had just become public knowledge that the Russian American Fur Company was preparing to leave California, and had offered its Fort Ross colony assets for sale. Duflot de Mofras wrote that when he visited Ross, the commandant, Rotschef, requested him repeatedly to take over Ross on behalf of the French government, but de Mofras replied that he had no instructions from his government to that effect. He urged them to continue overtures to Captain Sutter. Additionally, de Mofras made every effort to convince Captain Sutter, whom he visited later, to take over the Russian properties. A memoir to the French Government, not included in the original French publication but added as an appendix to the English translation "Duflot de Mofras' Travels on the Pacific Coast" by Marguerite Eyer Wilbur, 1937, gives the following explanation why his memoir was not published, as this excerpt makes clear:

M. Sutter, although born in Switzerland, poses as a Frenchman inasmuch as he served for twelve years in our former royal guard. In fact, he always declared in California that he considered himself under the protection of France . . . . Early in September I went to see M. Sutter in person and after spending several days with him, and after he had asked my advice on the Russian proposal, I persuaded him to accept it. Furthermore, as I was going down the river (the Sacramento) on September 8, I met M. de Rotschef who was on his way to New Helvetia. These gentlemen went together to Ross where the purchase was concluded after a detailed inventory of all effects contained in these establishments had been completed.

Parenthetically, it may be noted that the French army service which Sutter claimed to have made to Duflot de Mofras, as well as the title of Captain, were both drawn from his imagination after he had left Europe.

Duflot de Mofras visited Sutter's Fort before the structure was completed, but he had the imagination to see that it was strategically located. "M. Sutter has frequently expressed the desire to have a few French missionaries reside at his fort to civilize the neighboring Indians. This plan deserves to be given consideration."
In the private memoir, de Mofras suggests that the substitution of French missionaries for the former Spanish orders would pave the way through religious ascendency to political supremacy. Further, in the memoir, Duflot de Mofras suggests to his government that the French might intervene in California on the pretext of a certain Frenchman who had been murdered, and his death left unpunished. The agent could contact French living in California, and next communicate with M. Sutter. He (the agent) should bring engineers, including one with naval training, to make a technical survey, especially of timber resources for sale to a European market. For this purpose, the Bodega properties should be purchased because of the good harbor and facilities. "It would be comparatively simple to have a suitable agent purchase the remaining properties--M. Sutter, I believe, will give his consent--for approximately 15,000 piastres, or 75,000 francs."

Thereafter, by de Mofras' plan, the French should get hold of the farms lying between Bodega and San Francisco Bay--"it would be a relatively simple matter to secure them under the name of other Frenchmen." Duflot de Mofras even had possible colonizers at hand: the French Canadians at Wilamette, who would welcome the chance to go south to cultivate land. The land abandoned by the Russians could be distributed to them. It may be due to this master plan of Duflot de Mofras that Sutter received secretly a certificate of transfer to the land of Ross colony, signed by Commandant Rotschef, and dated one day earlier than the contract of sale for the mobile property of the colony.

What about the relationship between Count Duflot de Mofras and Captain Jean Jacques Vioge during the visit to Yerba Buena? De Mofras states that there were not more than 20 houses, which belonged exclusively to foreigners, and that "A Swiss Captain, M. Vioge, owns a well built house and shop." The coolness appears to be due not so much to a class distinction between a French nobleman and a Swiss saloon keeper, but to de Mofras' judgment that Vioge would not further French plans. Notwithstanding Vioge's service under Napoleon, and his training in Paris as a naval engineer (according to Vioge family tradition) de Mofras did not list Vioge either as a potential technician in his scheme nor as a colonizer. Vioge had applied for Rancho Blucher bordering the Ross colony prior to this period, but as the property was sold two years later to Captain Smith, Vioge appears to have been no part of French high strategy. In contrast, Sutter was.

The purpose of Duflot de Mofras' visit was a subject of open speculation at the time. Davis recorded that the United States Commodore Wilkes, upon returning to Yerba Buena from the Sacramento River, "on being informed that de Mofras had been a guest of Spear while stopping at Yerba Buena, was greatly interested, and inquired carefully and particularly about de Mofras' visit to California, asking Spear for all the details of his movements here and his conversations.

He was particularly anxious to know if de Mofras ever divulged that the French Government had any designs or intentions in regard to the bay of San Francisco."

According to family tradition, from the first time Captain
Vioget saw San Francisco Bay, he was impressed by its beauty and
great possibilities. He made the water color painting of Yerba
Buena Cove in July, 1837. Thereafter, it is said, he hung the
painting in his ship and while on his travels discoursed on the
magnificent harbor. He was thus the first "Chamber of Commerce"
for San Francisco. It was another two years before he was able
to return to make his permanent residence in Yerba Buena, in Oc­
tober, 1839.

Vioget's Property Acquisitions

Vioget was quick to adapt himself to the opportunities avail­
able in California after making his residence. On November 1,
1839, Vioget received his first piece of California land from the
government in Monterey. This was located on the west side of the
road to Mission Dolores, near a small lagoon, halfway between the
pueblo of Yerba Buena and the mission. This was a 100 x 50 vara
lot (the vara is a Spanish yard of approximately 33 inches.) Ap­
parently the measurement was short, for Vioget petitioned in Jan­
uary of 1840 to add the eight varas he was short. This first land
holding was located near the present intersection of Market and
Van Ness Streets. A second lot, 100 x 50 varas, was granted to
Vioget in January, 1840, near Grant and Sacramento Streets. In
addition, Vioget acquired the property on the present Kearny Street,
southwest of Portsmouth Plaza, in 1839, where he built his resi­
dence and established the billiard house and hotel. The hotel
venture was run with the help of Peter Scherreback, a Dane. After
1843, Vioget rented his hotel to others, and after 1846 it was
renamed the Portsmouth Hotel.

In 1841, Vioget unsuccessfully petitioned the Mexican gov­
ernor in Monterey for a grant to ranch Laguna Seca, lying between
Mission Dolores and the ocean. He also petitioned for rancho
Blucher in Marin and Sonoma counties, along the American River
estuary. In support of that petition, in May, 1842, Vioget pre­
presented himself to the Governor at Monterey, declared that he was
a Mexican citizen and resident of Yerba Buena, Port of San Fran­
cisco, and that he desired to remain permanently in the Depart­
ment of California. A provisional grant was issued shortly thereafter,
but a grant in fee was made because he was unmarried. Within
three years this marital provision was no longer applicable, and
on October 14, 1844, Vioget received the grant in fee for rancho
Blucher, for six leagues, from Governor Micheltorena. At this
time Vioget stated that he had made considerable expenditure for
building a house, corral and grain fields since the provisional
concession.

During a sea voyage to Peru at the end of 1843, Vioget met
Captain Stephen Smith, to whom he sold the provisionally granted
rancho Blucher. Vioget was at sea most of time between 1843 and
1846. Returning from another Peruvian trip in 1846, Vioget was
picked up in Acapulco and brought back to California. This is
recorded in the Journal of Captain John Paty, published in the
California Historical Society Quarterly of 1935: "A few days be­
fore I left (Acapulco), Captain John Vioget arrived in the Bark Clarita from Calao, he was an old friend of mine, as we both arrived in California in the month of June, 1837. He was dissatisfied with the owners of the Bark and left her and took passage with us to California. I gave him a passage as he was a very good man and since that time he has done me many favors."

Fellowship among sea captains, as among other professional groups, transcended national affiliations.

Captain Stephen Smith, the purchaser of rancho Blucher, settled later in Bodega, where he bought all of Sutter's title and interest and erected the first steam saw mill in the province of California. Rancho Blucher was covered with timber, mostly redwood, which Smith wanted for the work of the mill. It is recorded that part of the payment, after the mill was established, was made on December 24, 1847, when Smith gave Captain Vioget lumber valued at $1,500 on the market at the time.

In addition to his investments in land, and the construction of a hotel with billiard room and bar, Vioget used his training as a surveyor. The survey of the pueblo of Yerba Buena in 1839 was the second one made, but became the basic survey of the pueblo which became San Francisco. Contemporary accounts say Vioget kept the survey plat of Yerba Buena in his house, and as lots were sold, pencilled in the location and name of the owner. For the next six or seven years, this was the only record of the town's real estate locations.

Vioget married Maria Benevides, a widow with two children, on July 10, 1847, at Mission Dolores. The marriage certificate lists the bride's age as 30, while the groom's age is written as 26—an error of twenty years, as he was actually 46. Shortly after the marriage, Vioget offered the Portsmouth Hotel and lot for sale. He lived with his new wife Maria Benevides de Vasques in the adobe house she had built on family property. It is recorded that in 1850 Vioget bought this property from the Benevides family, then sold it in four pieces in 1850, 1851, 1853 and 1854. After Vioget moved to San Jose in 1849, it is recorded that he bought four pieces of property in the town. The major holding, on which he built a house within a year, worth $4,000, was on The Alameda in San Jose. During 1850, Vioget also bought a lot in the city of Vallejo. At one period, Vioget lived with his wife on the 320 acre Pulgas Rancho, three miles west of the Palo Alto tree, a property which his wife had inherited. Thereafter, the family moved to San Jose, where Vioget lived with his family until his death. There were two sons born of the marriage: J. J. Vioget, Jr., and William.

Apparently the efforts of Vioget to secure properties around the pueblo of Yerba Buena brought financial reward in later years, for a rare publication of 1851 in the Bancroft Library entitled "A 'Pile' or a glance at the wealth of the moneyed men of San Francisco and Sacramento City" lists one J. T. Vioget as having assets worth $50,000. J. J. Vioget is the only one of that name known to have come to the city, so it would appear to have been a misprint. It is not clear where Vioget resided at that time, as he had already moved his family from the bustling and overcrowded city
to the peninsula. Conditions in San Francisco were not favorable to family life, scarcely even to physical survival, at the time. The crowds of avid gold seekers and the newly arrived criminal element represented a real threat to public safety.

There is no indication that Vioget was ever sufficiently involved in the frenzy of gold mining to undertake it himself. Yet Vioget learned of the discovery of gold almost as early as anyone in California, two months after the historic find at Sutter's mill on the American River. The story is related by Edward Kemble, a journalist who visited San Francisco in the year 1848: several men arrived by launch from Sacramento with a few gold flakes. It was March of 1848. One exhibited these, but there was a varied opinion as to whether it was real gold, fool's gold, or mica. One of the men asked for Captain Vioget's house and rushed there. "By and by the exhibitor was joined by his companion, who had inquired the way to 'old Vioget's.' I afterwards learned that he had gone there to submit some specimens to the Captain for a 'test' as he was reputed to have some skill in the analysis of minerals. Vioget's opinion, if given at all, was not revealed. The party at the store separated without any very lively impression having been made on the lookers-on." (A Kemble Reader, Stories of California 1846-1848 by Edward Cleveland Kemble, Early California Journalist, 1963) Elsewhere in his memoirs, Kemble refers to the Mexican adobe on Kearny Street, "of our worthy and esteemed townsman, John J. Vioget, a gentleman, scholar and surveyor. Vioget was the first to survey and lay off the town of San Francisco, and his work was afterward incorporated into the more general survey made by Jasper O'Farrell."

The Gold Rush, as mentioned, brought a great variety of men in search of gold—anybody's gold—so that by the spring of 1851 neither life nor property was safe in San Francisco, and a number of fires of suspected incendiary origin added to the general suffering of the populace. A Committee of Vigilance was organized by the most solid and respectable members of the community, on June 9, 1851. Jean Jacques Vioget, or John J. Vioget as he was known, was a member of the Committee of Vigilance. He was never an officer, but was listed as member No. 196. The Committee of Vigilance, by prompt action and deportations, frightenened the criminal element of the community so that gradually the work of the Committee was given up.

On February 4, 1852, the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Committee of Vigilance show that John J. Vioget presented his resignation from the Committee because of the removal of his family "at a farm distant from the City." Vioget stated that if he had remained in town he would have "felt honored to remain as a member of the said Committee." The Executive Committee, on February 5, 1852, refused to accept a resignation, but gave John J. Vioget unlimited leave of absence with remission of dues and fines. Furthermore, Vioget was thanked in the name of the Committee for untiring vigilance and promptness when called upon for duty. Membership in this Committee gives proof of the degree to which Vioget adapted to the greatly changed world of American conquest from the slower paced period of Mexican California.
It was a modest but continuous progress in accumulating capital by way of real estate transactions which enabled Vioget to perform a service which is one of the most intriguing aspects of his life and contrasts so dramatically with his compatriot Sutter.

When a cross-section of the world poured into California to make their fortunes with the Gold Rush—from the United States, from Chile, from China, from Australia, from Europe—one of the adventurers was the returned former commandant of Fort Ross, Alexander Rotschef, who came to California in 1851, exactly ten years after he had left its shores. Rotschef came from Europe in the capacity of both literary observer and as a hopeful gold seeker. Rotschef's letters relating his sea voyage from Europe, the crossing of the isthmus of Panama, and his disappointment in his efforts to make a fortune in California, were published in the California Historical Society Quarterly as recently as 1960. Rotschef noted that it was difficult for him to succeed, even if he knew the country and the language from his previous experience, because of the lack of capital. Rotschef wrote letters from Murderers Bar in late November, 1851, spent December and January of 1851-1852 in San Francisco, and then returned to the mines, stopping to see Captain Sutter en route. Whatever hopes he had of the man whom he had known under happier circumstances, when he signed for the sale of the Port Ross colony, were completely dashed:

"After I had spent some time with Sutter I was convinced that he could not be helpful to me: he is so poor and in addition, hardly master of his soul." Rotschef returned to mining on the Yuba River, and the letters cease. In order to leave California and return to Europe, Rotschef apparently turned to Vioget, the only person of responsibility known in his earlier life, and borrowed 560 Spanish dollars or the equivalent in francs, drawn on His Highness the Prince Gagarin (Rotschef's father-in-law) at Rue de la Paix No. 3, Paris. Vioget had been the witness for the sale of Fort Ross to Sutter, and undoubtedly had met Rotschef in Yerba Buena on other occasions. The signer of the note is Alexander Gavirolofich Rotschef. The original document, now at Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, is one of the few existing Vioget personal documents.

The last documented activity in the final year of Vioget's life concerns a trip to Sacramento where Vioget was summoned by Sutter to identify the southwest corner of his survey of New Helvetia, made fifteen years earlier. The fee for this service was $300. On September 4, 1855, Vioget identified a tree near Sutterville on the bank of the Sacramento River as the tree which he had selected as the southwest corner of the survey. This was certified and signed by Vioget in September of 1855. By the end of the following month he died in San Jose.

The last year of Vioget's life appears to have been an unhappy one. In a letter written in June, 1855, after concluding arrangements to go to Sacramento, Vioget stated that he expected to leave San Francisco for the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) by the end of the month. A companion who went with Vioget to Sacramento on his last journey to identify the Helvetia grant border testified
five years later that "Viogt stated and dwelt upon the subject frequently that he was completely disgusted with California, and was going to sell his place within a few months and go to some of the Pacific Islands or to India." Indeed, the home Viogt had built in San José was sold on June 1, 1855.

As for the relocation survey which Viogt undertook for Sutter, it can be assumed that Viogt undertook it because he felt obligated by old acquaintance and loyalty to the unhappy man. The timing was not convenient in view of his imminent departure, and a fee of $300 was no great inducement for a man of Viogt's substantial financial position.

Captain Viogt died on October 26, 1855. His widow, Maria Benevides Viogt, remained in San José with her children until her death in 1889. Of the two sons born of the marriage to Viogt, J. J. Viogt, Jr. died at the age of 18, while William lived near San José until his death in 1900. An undated San Francisco newspaper interview with William Viogt on file in the library of the Society of California Pioneers, referring to the painting of San Francisco harbor as having been made sixty years earlier (therefore the interview presumably was made in 1897) gives some interesting insights into Captain Viogt's life. Since William Viogt was less than eight years of age at the time of his father's death, his knowledge must have been transmitted to him by his mother.

William Viogt, the article stated, has many mementoes of his father, and delights to talk of the part his father had in the development of San Francisco. Viogt said of his father "he made the original survey of San Francisco at the request of the Mexican authorities. This survey, made in 1837 (1839) is still recognized as the official survey of the old portion of San Francisco, and many big lawsuits have been decided by it." The younger Viogt said that his father spoke seven languages fluently. The Captain had made his living by following the sea for 32 years until he moved to the country in 1851, and "it was his boast that no ship in his command had ever met with a mishap." This was no little achievement considering the extensive voyages he had undertaken and the conditions of the time.

Speaking of the last year of his father's life, William Viogt stated that Captain Viogt had decided to return to France "in order to put us boys to school" and intended to go by the Sandwich Islands, where the King of Hawaii had made a flattering offer that he stop to do some surveying. All preparations had been made, his father had engaged passage for the entire family for a ship leaving San Francisco, and his mother had packed all their personal effects. Then, only a few days before the ship was to leave, Captain Viogt hurried to see his friend Pedro Sainsevain on business affairs and had gone to a restaurant for dinner with him when he was stricken. At first it was thought that the illness was indigestion, but three days later Viogt was dead.

Of the mementoes left by his father, William Viogt treasured most the 1837 water color painting of San Francisco harbor, which his father had painted because he was so deeply impressed by the magnificent harbor. The newspaper interview concluded by citing William Viogt as a prosperous stock raiser in Santa Clara County,
who "is known to almost every horseman on the Coast as a handler and driver of trotting and packing stock."

It was the widow of William Vioget, Alice Vioget, who became acquainted with the late Harry C. Peterson, curator at Sutter's Fort at Sacramento. Peterson had a keen sense of history and recognized the role played by Jean Jacques Vioget in early California. Because of the interest of Harry Peterson, the surviving personal documents of Jean Jacques Vioget, including a copy of his certificate of origin, two Swiss passports dated 1831 and 1833, a Brazilian passport dated 1829, several letters, his photograph, and the surveyor's instruments are now at Sutter's Fort. But Peterson died before he could write the biography of Vioget which he had long planned, and which was based on personal information from Alice Vioget.

Swiss who have studied the life of Captain Sutter in California and earlier are not entirely comfortable with him as the publicized Swiss in the building of America. Yes, he was Swiss, they admit, but not representative of Swiss behavior. Perhaps Sutter's character embodied more the virtues of the American frontier: boldness, grandiose plans, personal aggrandizement, all spiced with a dash of chicanery. It may have been the inexorable logic of fate that Sutter's great schemes of empire were finished when his own workman discovered gold, thus launching the human tide to the west which has never stopped, and which swept Sutter to his destruction. It is ironic that the Americans allowed Sutter to perish miserably in exile, having lost his empire, before enshrining him as a legend of the old West: the kindly patriarch welcoming the weary overland emigrants to Sutter's Fort and golden California. Sutter's heroic stature, perpetuated in a state museum, may be credited to his symbolic value in the idealization of the American frontier as it recedes into history.

Those individuals who are dissatisfied with Sutter as a culture hero may find comfort in the person of Captain Jean Jacques Vioget, his compatriot and contemporary, who interacted during his lifetime with the more famous Sutter. Vioget represents those aspects of life which Swiss value highly: technical competence, good citizenship, modesty in behavior, amiable fellowship and the respect of the community, ability to live within one's means and not become over-extended, and independence of judgment and action.

As Captain Vioget died before he had completed his self-appointed tasks—the survey of Hawaii, the return to Europe and the education of his children—he also lacked time to prepare his records for posterity and therefore has been largely ignored by historians. Yet Vioget remained true to his Swiss heritage, and is as remarkable for what he did not do in those years of violent turmoil—such as refrain from international politics—as for what he did do.

Captain Jean Jacques Vioget; sea captain, musician, hotel keeper, linguist, engineer, surveyor, entrepreneur, can serve admirably as a representative of the genius of the Swiss people: to do one's job, to preserve a warm human relationship with one's fellow man, and to maintain personal ideals and standards while so engaged. For much too long Vioget has remained in the shadow of
the more opportunistic and publicity conscious John Augustus Sutter. Vioget has earned our respect for the quality of his life, and for the modesty which he exhibited in carrying out his labors.

From what we learned of Vioget in his early California period, he valued highly the intimate personal bonds, the variety of human beings, which the pace of Mexican California made possible. His travels in many cultures gave him an appreciation for the human aspects of life.

The area of San Francisco which is most intimately connected with Captain Jean Jacques Vioget is the old Portsmouth Plaza and vicinity. On nearby Kearny Street was the Vioget Hotel where Vioget kept bar for the visiting ship captains and where the legendary eating match with Hoeppner occurred; at the corner of Keary and Commercial streets was the adobe home of Maria Benevides de Vasques where their son William was born in 1848. Only a block below was the San Francisco Bay shoreline, where Vioget's ships had arrived from many local and various distant voyages. One can scarcely visualize the peaceful scene of the 1837 painting and the following decade in present day automobile traffic and twentieth century high-rise construction. There is no street, no memorial plaque in any part of San Francisco to record the sojourn of this extraordinary man.

The grave of Jean Jacques Vioget, long unmarked and unknown, was rediscovered by the assiduous efforts of Dr. Jacob N. Bowman, who is himself of Swiss descent. It was honored by the Yerba Buena chapter of E CLAMPUS VITUS on March 18, 1961, when an inscribed stone was placed on the grave in Oak Hill Cemetery south of San Jose:

JEAN JACQUES VIOTGET
1799 - 1855
Surveyor of Yerba Buena, 1839
E CLAMPUS VITUS
March, 1961