Opinion: Importance of Calif.’s Admission’s Day

By Joe Mathews

As California celebrates Admission Day—we joined the United States on Sept. 9, 1850—we should give ourselves an overdue present: A founding story of our statehood starring someone we can be proud of, both as Californians and Americans.

Like too much else in California, the narrative of our statehood is sprawling and complicated, involving the Mexican-American War, the Gold Rush and migration—and devoid of a hero who can tie the history together The closest thing we have had is Sen. John C. Fremont, whose main talents were for insubordination and bankruptcy.

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Fortunately, more recent scholarship suggests that California could cut through its obscure history in a Shermanesque way. William Tecumseh Sherman—the Civil War general known for his decisive march through the South—offers Californians a compelling but overlooked protagonist in the tale of becoming a state.

Sherman’s military exploits have long overshadowed his earlier time in California—which was formative both for the state and for the man himself. A new biography from historian James Lee McDonough shows how Sherman served as a stabilizing figure for

California during war, the Gold Rush, and various crises.

Originally from Ohio, Sherman arrived in California as a soldier in 1847. Stationed in Monterey, he never saw action in the Mexican-American War, but met almost everyone of note, visiting missions, hunting grizzly bears, patronizing the arts, and opening a store in Coloma (to supplement his Army wages). He was an early surveyor of the Sierra Nevada, traveled to L.A. by boat and horseback, and was a fixture of the gold country during the Gold Rush, even getting to know John Sutter.

In 1849, Sherman was the U.S. military's representative at the California convention, which produced the state's first constitution. In 1850, California entered the Union as a free state, part of a famous compromise in the long run-up to the Civil War. That same year, Sherman went east to marry. But by 1853, he had resigned from the Army and was back in San Francisco to establish a bank, becoming a significant figure in the growth and travails of California's first great city.

Sherman's conservative management of his growing bank made him an outlier in the wildly unregulated and corrupt financial sector of 1850s San Francisco. McDonough recounts—with new details—how Sherman's care forestalled banking panic; in 1855, even as Wells Fargo and other banks closed during a bank run, Sherman's bank stayed open and calmed the city.

He did this all at personal cost. San Francisco was so expensive (some things don't change) that even a banker couldn't afford to live there; he went deeply into debt. His wife, not without reason, considered the city "thoroughly wicked" and begged him to leave. He suffered from terrible asthma that was aggravated by San Francisco's wet weather. And he was bitterly criticized by the press in 1856 when he opposed the Committee of Vigilance that had lawlessly seized control of the city, banished some enemies, and hanged others.

After another financial panic, Sherman would have to shut down his bank in 1858—though he was scrupulous about it—selling his own property so that depositors could be made whole. Having invested eight years and most of his money in California, he left the state that summer, but often would confess a desire to return (even in letters written at the height of the Civil War).

“If I had no family I would stay in California all my life,” he wrote in one letter. Alas, he would come back only as a visitor.

Sherman’s view of California, formed in that founding period from 1847 to 1858, still resonates. He loved the natural beauty of the place and the adventurous culture of its people. But he was distressed by its volatility, its boom-and-bust economy, and he learned to distrust its democratic spirit, since that could curdle so quickly into mob rule.

“Sherman’s lack of patience with democratic republican government … emerged full blown during the Californian years,” writes McDonough, adding: “He beheld a society dramatically transformed, in an amazingly short period of time. It was not a pretty sight.”

California, McDonough shows, helped convince Sherman that humans needed a strong hand—and that authorities should deal forcefully with those who might step out of line. It would of course be the South that would feel the full force of Sherman’s conclusion.

Sherman became Sherman here, just as California was becoming the state of California. After 166 years, isn’t it time we adopted a founding narrative that is more Shermanesque?

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