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Madera County Divorce

In a perfect world, marriages are meant to last a lifetime. Of course, "a lifetime" is a very, very, very, very, long, long, long, long, long time. In some cases it feels like a thousand years have gone by, even though only one or two years have passed. I recall a conversation I had with my wife and my mother-in-law at our one year anniversary. They were saying how the year had just flown by and how short it seemed to them. Before I engaged my brain I said, "It seems like it was forever ago." I can still feel the pain of my mother-in-law's glare. And she's passed away in 1998!

Things happen over time. I guess it is inevitable sometimes that people just can't get along well enough anymore and decide to split up. There could be any number of reasons...perhaps they get tired of each other's company, maybe they can no longer tolerate the behavior of the other person, or maybe they just "grow apart." Maybe one party realized that the whole thing was just a big mistake in the first place.

Perhaps there is some interloper who infiltrates the union and causes things to go awry. "That's not lipstick on my collar, I was just hurrying back home to you, my sweet darling, and I had myself a little fall."

It might be a purely financial decision in that one person keeps buying fire trucks and the other doesn't like fire trucks. (Fortunately, I'm very lucky that Anita loves fire trucks and encourages me to buy more and more! And trains, too!!

In some cases family members cause the problems, and those problems just seem to get worse and worse over time. There are so many reasons for a divorce that it is hard to track them all and pin point exactly where things went wrong.

It might be that one party wants the divorce and the other doesn't, which is very sad, indeed. Such was the case, in 1893, when the citizens of what is now Madera County decided they wanted to end their union with Fresno County, and strike out on their own. The people of Fresno County didn't want to dissolve the union, but the people of Madera County felt otherwise.

Agitation for division had already begun by 1890. Several newspaper articles (in the Madera two newspapers) had argued in favor of establishing the new county.

One of the biggest issues was representation. Madera County was actually Fresno County Supervisorial District Number 1 in 1890. That means one representative in county government. By splitting off, Madera would presumably become the county seat (more on that later) and there would be five districts contained in the new Madera County, so five supervisors to oversee the affairs of the new county.

Another argument in favor of division was the size of the area. Madera County is larger than Massachusetts and New Jersey, and larger than the areas of Rhode Island, Delaware, and Connecticut combined. Madera's population was growing much faster than Fresno's, businesses were thriving there, and the area deserved to be a separate County. The new county would decrease the need for travel and inconvenience because the county government would be closer.

But to become a new county, there must first be a proclamation from the state legislature to hold a special election to decide the issue. The new county must have a population of at least 5,000 people. If 2/3 of the people voted in favor, then the new county would be established and the old county would have no say about the matter. At the time, Madera County had about 6,400 population. And, it would be only the people from the proposed Madera County who would be voting. Fresno County residents would have not vote.

An 8 page booklet professing the reasons for division was published and sent to the legislature. Articles appeared in Sacramento area newspapers, hawking the viability of the new county. The legislature lived in Sacramento and read the Sacramento papers, so this made perfect sense.

George Mordecai, a Madera area rancher and State Assemblyman immediately asked for a resolution in the State Assembly to approve such a division. But Fresno Senator George Goucher asked for an "expression" from the people of Fresno County before he made his proposal to the Senate. He wanted Fresno County to have a say in the matter. A meeting was set for January 28, 1893 to obtain that expression. The meeting would be held at Kutner Hall in the 1100 block Fulton Street in Fresno, approximately across the street from the Helm building location today.

It the meeting would turn into an epic battle. The rebel forces met at Mace's Hotel in Madera to draw up their plans. They chartered a special train from Madera to take them to Fresno for the meeting, which was set for 7:30pm. They would arrive just in time to take their seats and argue their position.

Unfortunately, the Fresno people arrived at 6pm and filled all the available seats. When the Madera folks rolled in at 7:15, there were no seats for them to take and they were left standing, or standing outside.

But strangely enough, there was soon a fire alarm! The Fresno men ran from the room to fight the fire, as every patriotic manly man would do in such a time of crisis. The city was aflame, and the need was great.

When they couldn't find the fire, they returned to the hall. But now they found a rebel sympathizer in charge of the meeting, which had already started, and all the seats were taken by Maderans, which left the Fresno people standing, or standing outside.

What happened next was sheer pandemonium. People from Fresno who argued against the division were loudly yelled at and called names. There was so much noise that no one appeared in charge of the meeting, and the speeches that were made were hardly audible.

Madera area rancher Henry Daulton was heard to say, "We want a divorce from you, and we don't want you to pay any alimony. If my wife were to tell me that two thirds of her wanted to go away from me and she didn't want me to pay any alimony, it would be very cruel on my part to not let her go, although my wife is very dear to me and she has given birth to every child that I have."

Finally it came time for a decision. A standing vote was called. All people in favor were asked to stand. So the Maderans all stood up. The secretery tried to count, but it appeared that the whole room was standing, and surging in various directions. Then the chair asked for the votes against division. The Maderans sat down, leaving only the few Fresnans standing. The vote was counted at 865 in favor of division, and somewhere around 65 opposed.

Both houses of the legislature presented their bills to create Madera County, and the official election was called.

The official vote, only by people living north of the San Joaquin River, was 1179 to 368 in favor of division.

As a side note, the mountain people of the new Madera County were not in favor of division, for they feared that nothing much would change. They would still have to go all the way to the valley floor to do their government business, In the assumed new County Seat of Madera. So they propose an alternative.

At the intersection of the old stage road (Road 400) and Bates Station Road (Road 406), near Savage's Trading Post at Fort Bishop at Adobe Ranch, the mountain folks proposed a new city, to be called Minarets. They began building a town there, including a school, a store, a post office, a lumber yard, and several other buildings.

To be honest, this is a really bad place for a town. It is far from the railroad, far from water, and far from established industries. True, the stage road ran nearby, and the Adobe Ranch (Savage's old Fresno Indian Rancheria) was nearby, but nothing else.

When it was put to vote in May of 1893, Madera was favored as the County seat by a vote of 1065 to 567. The town of Minarets (or Media as it was sometimes called because it was thought to be the actual center of California) faded into nothing. By 1898 everything was gone.