

The Strange Story of Emperor Norton

By DAVID WARREN RYDER

Thumbing through a little booklet called *Storied San Francisco*, one of the editors of the *Post* recently came upon an odd and heart-warming little segment of history. He found it so charming that he passed it along to other members of the staff, and it was agreed that for once we should waive our rule against reprinting anything which had already appeared elsewhere.

Reprint rights were purchased from the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company, which had issued the booklet in commemoration of the recent United Nations Conference in San Francisco. *Storied San Francisco*, from which the following account of Emperor Norton is taken, was written by David Warren Ryder, long-time student of San Francisco history. —The Editors.

THERE is a period in the life of San Francisco which historians not too somber or fact-bound boldly designate as "The Reign of Emperor Norton." By them it is not regarded as too much to say that the story of this astonishingly strange and attractive figure, who, in San Francisco, was crowned—by himself—"Emperor of America and Protector of Mexico," and as such "ruled and reigned" benevolently here for well-nigh thirty years, presents the truest portrait words can ever give of the spirit and the heart of San Francisco.

Into San Francisco one bleak November day in 1847 or '48 came Joshua Abraham Norton. Born in London, he lived for a time in South Africa, but of the remainder of his early life nothing seemingly is known.

His arrival in San Francisco was unremarked, and so were the first several years of his sojourn. He appears to have been successful, both in the mercantile business and in buying and selling real estate. But, no more successful than many others of his time, there was nothing to single him out for especial attention.

And then, quite suddenly, from variously assigned causes—all partaking of business or financial reverses, he was bereft of his reason, and lived thereafter as a marked and most unusual man. From somewhere about 1853 until he died in January, 1880, Joshua Abraham Norton lived and acted in the firm belief that he was Emperor of all America and Protector of Mexico.

During all these years San Franciscans accepted this lofty pretense at face value, and by thousands of kindly acts, public as well as private, graciously humored the innocent deception that aberrations had parented in this kindly man's mind. Food, clothing, shelter; admittance to the theater, opera and other forms of entertainment; cigars, tobacco, wines, books, magazines, newspapers—all these and more were furnished to him freely and gladly, to support and sustain his most unusual role, a role of which all history affords no other such example. He led the city's big parades, had a prominent place on the platform at all important meetings, attended sessions of the state legislature, issued his own paper money in denominations of fifty cents to two dollars, collected "taxes" now and then—as needed—from his "subjects," addressed Queen Victoria and the King of Prussia as "my dear cousins," and issued "imperial" proclamations and edicts almost without number—all couched in grandiloquent, albeit sensible, language and embellished with his ornate "imperial" seal. Few of his edicts or proclamations but were entirely sane and practical in their subjects. Most of them were addressed to righting wrongs or removing grievances; and one of them, *mirabile dictu*, ordered a bridge built from San Francisco to Oakland immediately, and at a site not far from where the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge now stands!

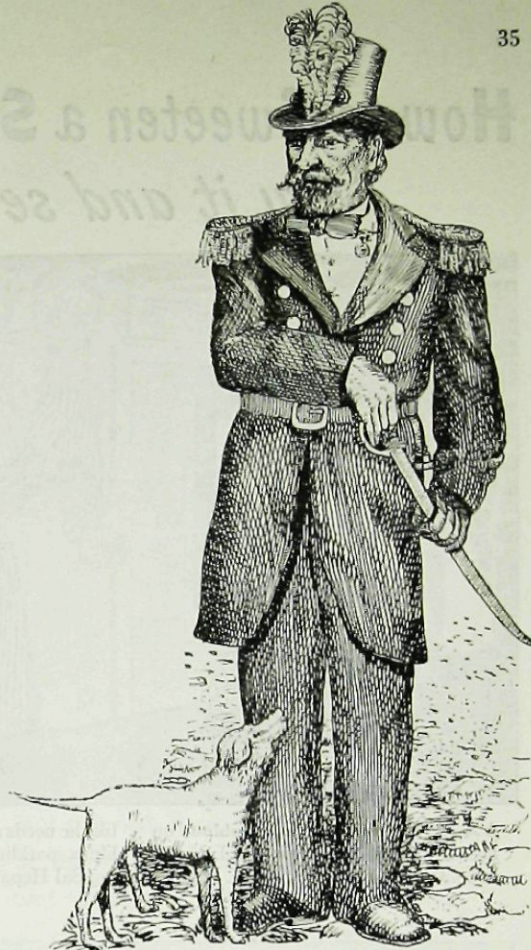
When the "Emperor's" uniform wore out, he simply announced through the friendly press his need of a new one, and it was always promptly forthcoming. Sometimes the newspapers would provide it, sometimes there was a public subscription, and once, with perhaps more enthusiasm than legal warrant, the

Board of Supervisors provided one out of public funds. His uniform, though hardly conforming to any "royal" pattern, was distinctly colorful. The coat was of navy blue, cut in military fashion and lavishly adorned with brass buttons. Trousers were of a much lighter blue, with a broad red stripe running down the outside of each leg. Ordinarily he wore a small hat that was a kind of oversized cap; it, too, resplendent with brass ornaments. But now and then, on "state" occasions, he donned a broad black affair ornamented with a long cockade and a band of red, white and blue ribbon. His boots were black and uncommonly large. Usually he carried a heavy cane, but sometimes when the occasion seemed to warrant, he substituted for the cane a huge sword, the gift of an admiring San Francisco blacksmith.

In all these years there are recorded only one or two instances in which the "Emperor's" regal claims were ever resisted.

Once, when he was en route to the state capital to attend and "advise" another session of the legislature, a dining-car waiter, who did not know him or his story, disputed his right to a free meal. This was also one of the very few times the "Emperor" was ever known to betray choler. He pounded the table, and in loud tones declared that for such *lèse majesté* he would revoke the railroad's franchise. However, the train conductor, attracted by the commotion, came and made the proper amends, and the next day the Central Pacific sent Emperor Norton a pass good on all its trains and in its dining cars for life.

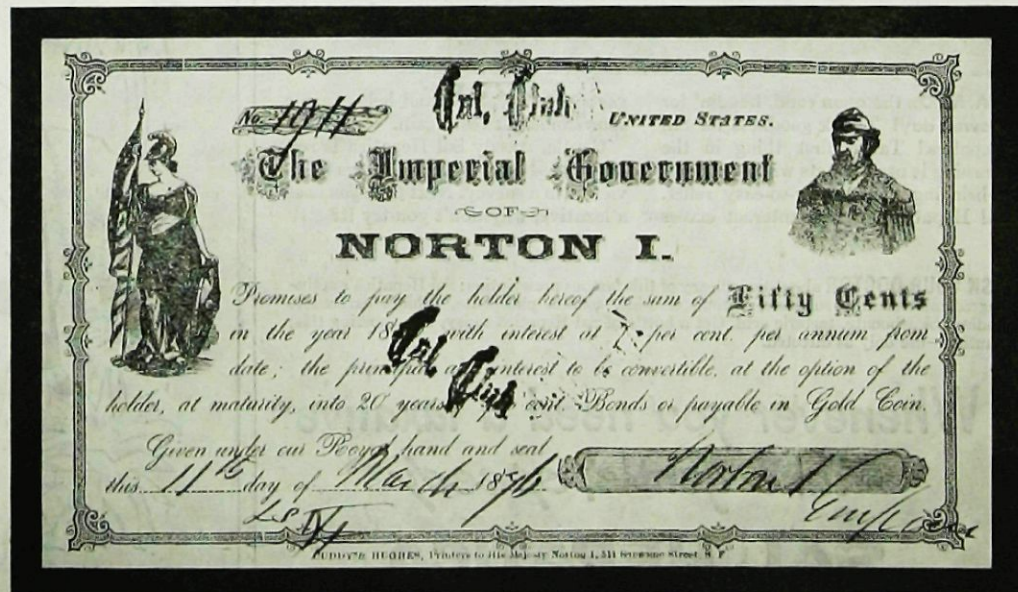
Nearly all his "imperial" proclamations were directed to community betterment and progress of one



Joshua Abraham Norton, self-dubbed "Emperor of America and Protector of Mexico."

sort or another, and many of them made proposals so eminently sane and practical as to be subsequently adopted. Aside possibly from the grandiloquence of their language, they betrayed no sign of the mental limitations of their author, and they seldom failed to make fitting reference to the moral law as foundation on which all man-made law should rest. A member of the Masonic fraternity, he yet was seen as often attending Catholic as Protestant churches, and on many occasions raised his voice—sometimes most effectively—for racial and religious understanding. One of his pronouncements, addressed to a cognate subject, was extolled by a nationally prominent clergyman as being closer to true Christianity than many preachments officially put out in its name.

It hardly can be surprising that such a personage, aberrant though he was, (Continued on Page 11)



Sample of the "money" the Emperor issued in denominations of from fifty cents to two dollars. Norton seldom accepted handouts, almost always insisted on giving his promise to pay.

THE STRANGE STORY OF EMPEROR NORTON

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endeared himself to the whole community and, besides the respect of its people, won also the guerdon of their enduring love. So that when, finally on January 8, 1880, he laid down his "imperial crown and sceptre," flags all over San Francisco were held at half staff, and he was given a public funeral at which more than 30,000 San Franciscans of all ranks and stations, including many children, paid homage at his bier. Nor should we be surprised to learn that when, fifty-four

years later, the city's growth required removal of the cemetery in which he was buried, his reinterment occasioned a public ceremony in which the mayor of San Francisco and many distinguished citizens participated, and which evoked from the San Francisco Chronicle this tribute:

"San Francisco today does what no other city on earth could or would attempt.

"This City by the Golden Gate pauses long enough, in these sorely troubled times (1934) to pay homage to an emperor who was no emperor, except in his imagination; to a ruler who was no ruler, except in his harmless pretensions; to a king who was no king, except to two non-

descript dogs which followed him about the streets of early-day San Francisco as his sole retinue; to a regal splendor that was a complete but lovable sham.

"For today, with pomp and ceremony, San Francisco inters in Woodlawn Memorial Park at Colma, all the remains of 'Emperor Norton I, Emperor of all the United States and Protector of Mexico.'"

Though more than five and sixty years have passed since the death of Emperor Norton, in San Francisco there yet remains—discernible to those who see more than bald exteriors—the nimbus of this kingly man, who, in a life of courtly pretense, lived less in league with sham than many a man who would have scorned him for his childish vagaries.

WE PUT THE FLATTOPS ON THE NIGHT SHIFT

(Continued from Page 27)

officer who stands on a little platform on the after, starboard corner of the flight deck and directs the planes in their final approach. These partners help the pilot make up for his lack of eyes.

Carrier planes line up for a landing by following each other around in a landing circle. It's much as if we were going around an imaginary dirt track at the county fair, with the carrier in the center. In that way we get the spacing, speed and altitude to come up the groove and put our wheels down on the flight deck. Before this routine, however, the pilot must find this landing circle in the darkness and get into it going in the right direction. He is led into clucking distance of the old mother hen by signals from his first teammate, the communications officer. Thus he locates his race track.

Now the friendly radio voice of his second teammate, the landing-control officer, helps him get on the track. While landing control still lends a gentle helping hand, it is now the pilot who negotiates the curves of the landing circle with his almost-human instruments and brings himself up to the ramp at the right height and speed. Coming up the groove at last, he flies into the arms—so to speak—of his third teammate, the landing-signal officer. Rigged out in a loose zoot suit of bright fluorescent satin with sleeves like a kimono, this character looks to the approaching pilot like some phantom from another world. However, he behaves exactly like his opposite number on a day carrier. He wields the familiar ping-pong paddles of his trade and these are also faced with yellow satin. Suit and paddles are illuminated by ultraviolet "footlights" shining up on their user from the edge of the platform on which he stands. This human semaphore, with signals of his arms and paddles, almost flies the plane to its landing. About all the pilot has to do is chop the throttle at the right time.

We went on active duty with the fleet on August 16, 1944. In the beginning, we operated by day in the first strikes to soften up the Philippines. It was not until October that we had a chance to show what night fighters could do. Both ship and aviation commands had much to learn about this new weapon, and fleet commanders naturally had to be careful not to foul up their regular operations. So on many a weary evening we sat in our ready rooms, all dressed up and no place to go, waiting in vain for the order: "Launch night fighters." However, our part in defending the fleet on October twelfth went far toward selling the ship captains on sending out night fighters whenever bogeys were detected. It also gave us a much-needed boost in morale.

Then, during the hectic days of the Philippine occupation, we had plenty of chances to prove ourselves.

Though the night fighters were the glamour boys, it was our night torpedo pilots to whom fame gave her first nod. The Japs threw their famous three-pronged attack at our Leyte landing forces on October twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth. Then the long, daring night searches of the Avenger torpedo bombers enabled our fleet command to shadow the enemy task forces at all hours and plan the tactics which resulted in a smashing victory. The shadowing began the night before the battle, when laughing, curly-headed Lt. (jg) John E. Dewis, USNR, first spotted the central Japa-

"Lucky" Jim Taylor—Lt. (jg) James Taylor, USNR—put the finger on the Japs and our torpedo pilots shadowed them all night. In so doing, they saved hours that proved to be the difference between smashing the Jap fleet and letting it get away.

Such night searches are the real test of our instrument flying. When he is tired, a night pilot's senses start screaming that the instruments are wrong. Then only those long months of instrument training enable him to grit his teeth and follow that old rule: "Don't believe anything but your instruments. Ever!"

The night fliers' deeds on the night of October twenty-eighth really made them favorites of the fleet. The day planes, returning from a late-afternoon strike on Manila, ran into the thunderheads of a heavy tropical storm. Meanwhile the storm had forced the whole fleet to withdraw toward the east. The returning squadrons could not see the ships through the rain and the gathering darkness. With gas running low, they called for help.

My boys, used to black nights and dirty weather, answered the SOS and located some forty of the lost planes. The day aircraft, flying wing on the night planes by means of running lights, were led safely back to their carriers. Meanwhile the other day planes orbited in the darkness until lack of gas forced them into the water. Most of these were located by the night fliers, who led destroyers to the rescue. Even after the main body of the searchers landed, the night air patrol, consisting of Lt. (jg) Robert R. Fegraeus, USNR, and Ens. Robert W. Klock, USNR, carried the search into the morning.

The night fliers had won the faith of carrier captains. Skippers no longer hesitated to launch them when Jap planes were approaching. In fact, it became standard procedure to have a night fighter ready on the catapult, besides the regular combat air patrol circling above. Pilots in night-adaptation goggles stood two-hour watches in the cockpits of these planes. Four minutes after a bogey was sighted, this readiness fighter would be catapulted at full throttle.

Then he would keep right on going after the Jap. The record for an interception is held by Bill Henry, who shot down a snooper eighteen minutes after the alert.

On the night of November nineteenth, two night fighters saved the fleet from a very serious attack. Ens. Wallace E. Miller, USNR, and Ens. Reuben F. Peterson, USNR, took off on an early-evening patrol over Luzon. A hundred and twenty miles away from the fleet, Wally and Rube spotted five Bettys flying low and obviously heading for a sneak attack. The Japs' timing was perfect. They would have caught the carriers just as planes were landing from the day strikes—a fine mess it would have been! Wally and Rube, however, methodically headed off the disaster by

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PRAYER AFTER TRIUMPH

By Joseph Auslander

In this grave hour of triumph
Which Thy hand, Lord, hath wrought,
Humble us yet, lest we forget
The things for which we fought.

Help us retain the fervor
Of faith, lest, flushed with pride,
We loudly boast, nor heed the host
Of martyrdom who died.

When we bestow the laurel,
When the bright list is named,
Lord, hold in mind the brave men blind,
The heroes halt and maimed.

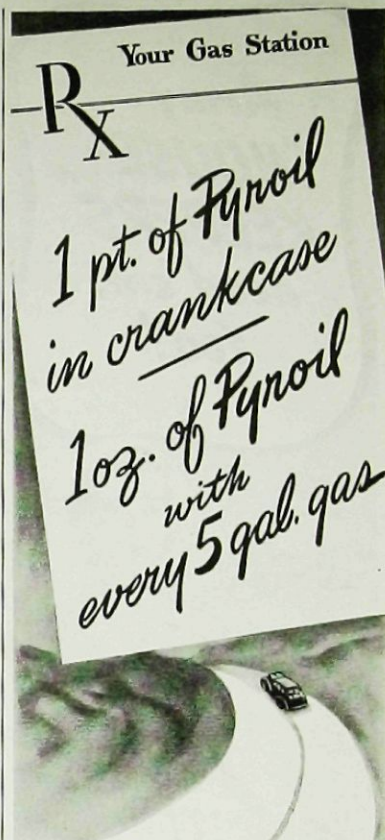
Now, having seen the horror
Which hate can make men do,
Keep clean the sword of freedom, Lord,
And search our own hearts too.

When we have done with battle,
When drums and trappings cease,
Be with us then and rouse in men
As fierce a zeal for peace.

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nese striking force of four battleships, eight cruisers and thirteen destroyers as it approached through San Bernardino Strait. The tailing continued for as long as there were Jap ships limping back to safety. All this time the weather, bad enough in the daytime, was terrible at night—high, dangerous thunderheads, fast-rising squalls and densely overcast skies that shut out even the faint starlight.

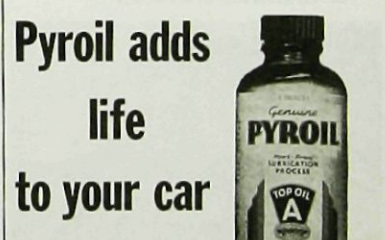
Meanwhile, east of the northern tip of Luzon, a big Japanese carrier task force had been reported steaming down on our landing forces at Leyte. During the night of October twenty-fourth, Admiral Halsey gathered all his task force to run north during the night for an attack the following morning. Early that evening,



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