

Francisco Ramirez: Pioneering Mexican-American Lawyer

PAUL GRAY

A pioneering Mexican-American lawyer in California, Francisco P. Ramirez, is the subject of a biography on which I have been working for several years while also practicing law in Claremont, California. A grant from the California Supreme Court Historical Society has made it possible to write several additional chapters, and now eleven of the projected twelve chapters are complete.

Ramirez (1837-1908) was well known during the 1850s as the precocious bilingual editor of a Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper, *El Clamor Público*. This publication failed because of unpopular political editorials and protests against unfair treatment of Mexicans. By 1869 Ramirez abandoned journalism to become a lawyer in Los Angeles. He formed a law partnership in 1872 with Frederick A. Stanford, a former colonel in the Texas State Militia. The last twenty-eight years of his life were spent in Baja California. The rare photograph that accompanies the text, showing him at age sixty-five, was recently discovered in a 1902 government file in Mexico City.

The following is a condensed excerpt from Chapter One, "A Precocious Journalist." (For reasons of space, the footnotes have been omitted.)

◆ ◆ ◆

The first edition of the Spanish-language newspaper, *El Clamor Público*, was distributed in Los Angeles on June 19, 1855 to a curious group of initial subscribers. The weekly publication was produced almost single-handedly by a brilliant and astonishingly precocious eighteen-year old named Francisco P. Ramirez who presented his journal as a champion of the Mexican people.

Ramirez's hopes for his newspaper were frustrated by its unpopular content. He often expressed radically liberal views on politics and race relations that both conservative Mexicans and Americans found offensive. Many readers recoiled at the unrestrained emotion presented in some of his editorials, a consequence of his extreme youth. Subscriptions and advertising gradually diminished until Ramirez, bankrupt and embittered, printed his last edition on December 31, 1859.

Francisco P. Ramirez was born in Los Angeles on February 9, 1837, the fourth of thirteen children. He was raised at his father's homestead near the plaza. As a nine-year-old, Ramirez may have witnessed the

entry of American troops into the little town on January 10, 1847. In good marching order, the force passed very near the Ramirez residence on Alameda Street, a stirring event enhanced by a brass band, the first ever heard in the city. His maternal grandfather's widow, Encarnación Sepúlveda de Avila, fled to the home of Louis Vignes, Ramirez's wealthy French-born godfather, leaving her residence at the plaza unattended. An American officer noticed the fine appearance and furnishings of the abandoned Avila adobe and ordered it taken for use as a military headquarters. This structure still stands on Olvera Street and is the oldest house in the city. The seizure of his grandfather's house by invading American forces was the first of many acts by which Ramirez learned, even as a child, that he belonged to a conquered people.

Ramirez grew up during an unstable period when Los Angeles was evolving from a remote adobe village on the Mexican frontier to an American city. He was a remarkable boy who quickly acquired an excellent knowledge of English from American settlers. Earlier in his life he had learned French, probably taught to him by Louis Vignes and his compatriots. Ramirez's mastery of French and English, together with his native Spanish, made him conversant in three languages before he was fourteen years old.

In his later years, Ramirez provided the historian Hubert Howe Bancroft with a biographical "dictation" in which he said that his education was mainly acquired by "self-application to books." The results were impressive. His later writing appears to be the work of a highly educated person. Without knowing his background, some historians have erroneously concluded that Ramirez must have been the product of a Mexican university. In fact, he was a self-taught prodigy who never went to school outside California.

During 1851, Ramirez was hired by the *Los Angeles Star* as a compositor. The newspaper first appeared on May 17, 1851, to serve American residents who were a distinct minority in a Mexican population. As a gesture toward its surroundings, the back page of the journal was printed in Spanish under the title *La Estrella de Los Angeles*. Ramirez's fourteenth birthday occurred just two months before the first edition of the *Star*. Despite his youth, he was a natural candidate for employment by the newspaper. Ramirez was one of the few people in Los Angeles who was at home with the printed word

in English and Spanish. He became an expert typesetter and absorbed the details of operating a newspaper.

[Ramirez then attended a Jesuit college in northern California and settled in San Francisco, where he was employed at the short-lived newspaper, *The Catholic Standard*, from 1853 to 1954. Thereafter, he worked briefly at *The Weekly California Express* in Marysville.]

Toward the end of 1854, Ramirez left Marysville and returned to Los Angeles. Upon his return he was only seventeen years old, but highly skilled in newspaper work and far more sophisticated than his age would suggest. These qualities induced James S. Waite, owner of the *Los Angeles Star*, to offer Ramirez the editorship of the paper's Spanish page, *La Estrella de Los Angeles*.

By January 1855, Ramirez transformed *La Estrella* into a lively source of local news and items of interest to Spanish-speaking readers. The February 2, 1855, issue of San Francisco's *Alta California* remarked, "The editor of the Spanish page of the *Los Angeles Star* is a native Californian named Francisco Ramirez, only fifteen years of age. Those versed in the Castilian language say that *La Estrella* is a model for purity of style." Actually, Ramirez was only a week short of his eighteenth birthday when this item was published, but it shows that he was acquiring a reputation among journalists as something of a phenomenon.

Ramirez was not long content as the editor of *La Estrella*. He aspired to begin his own Spanish-language newspaper in Los Angeles. This ambition was encouraged by his employer, James S. Waite, who thought that profits could be increased by abandoning the Spanish page altogether and using the extra space for English advertising. Waite allowed Ramirez to publicize his proposed newspaper in the pages of the *Star*. Ramirez chose to call his newspaper *El Clamor Público*, a name already in use by one of Madrid's great journals.

Throughout May 1855, the *Star* announced the forthcoming appearance of *El Clamor Público*, a newspaper to be "devoted exclusively to the service and interests of native Californians." Ramirez produced the first edition of *El Clamor Público* on June 19, 1855. A week later, the June 27 *Daily Alta California* in San Francisco passed a favorable judgment: "We received yesterday, the first number of *El Clamor Público*, a newspaper printed wholly in the Spanish language. It is edited and published by Francisco P. Ramirez, a native Californian, a mere youth in years... but uncommonly talented and well educated. *El Clamor Público* is a handsomely printed sheet and published at the low rate of \$5 per annum. We trust the Spanish people of the South will give this newspaper a liberal support.

Ramirez probably intended *El Clamor Público* to be an ethnic newspaper based on models he observed in San Francisco. It is highly doubtful that he was influenced by the example of the Mexican press. There

was no tradition of free elections in Mexico. After its independence in 1821, every government was installed through a violent revolution. Except for official gazettes and literary journals, most Mexican periodicals were ephemeral organs of insurrection and agitation. In contrast, *El Clamor Público* called for orderly social change and attempted to influence elections in the same manner as an American newspaper. Its format and style were nearly identical to any of the state's other three dozen or so newspapers. Ramirez's understanding of journalism was clearly a result of his experience working in the American press.

While his newspaper experiences taught Ramirez much about American society, he could not accept the position of Spanish-speaking people within it. He was aware that white Americans had the most alarming attitudes toward racial differences. As Bancroft wrote, "The feeling bred by border war and conquest, and more or less defiant contempt among Anglo-Saxons for the dark-hued and undersized Hispano-Americans, nicknamed greasers, had early evoked an ill-disguised animosity between the two races." Anglo-Saxon racism was the central problem in Ramirez's life. He understood that the inevitable result of American bias would be the subordination of Spanish-speaking people. His response was to publish *El Clamor Público* as an organ of Mexican resistance and political action.

The success of Ramirez's newspaper was jeopardized because he was out of touch with the profoundly conservative Mexican community in Los Angeles. At some point Ramirez had embraced the principles of nineteenth-century liberalism, especially the variety encountered in Mexico. He probably read the work of Mexicans like José María Luis Mora and other ideologues of the liberal movement headed by Benito Juárez.

Several recurrent themes appeared in the pages of *El Clamor Público* that were drawn directly from Mexican Liberalism. Among them was a fervent belief in racial equality and the abolition of slavery. Others included the impartial administration of justice and full political rights for every citizen. Such ideals were incorporated in the United States Constitution, a document greatly admired by Ramirez, but he believed they were largely nullified by American racism and slavery.

The traditional Mexican society of Los Angeles was not amenable to the views espoused by Ramirez. The most damaging opposition to *El Clamor Público* came from wealthy Spanish-speaking landowners who made up only about three percent of California Mexicans. This influential group resided in adobe townhouses adjacent to the plaza in Los Angeles when not visiting their outlying ranches. Sometimes known as the "ranchero elite" they controlled the economic, political, and social life of Mexican Los Angeles.

The first American political leaders cultivated an alliance with the rancho elite. One early politician, a young lawyer named Joseph Lancaster Brent, learned to speak fluent Spanish and set about recruiting prominent rancheros into the Democratic Party. Brent, a Catholic from Maryland, captivated many wealthy Mexican families by his personal charm, shared religious beliefs, and ability to speak the native language. He represented a branch of the Democratic Party originating in the Deep South known as the “Chivalry,” which zealously supported slavery and its extension into the territories acquired after the Mexican-American War. Many of the rancho elite found the Chivalry appealing. There was a certain analogy between their position as owners of vast estates supported by Indian labor and the aristocratic plantations of the South worked by Black slaves.

The vast majority of Mexicans in Los Angeles in the 1850s were members of the working class. In 1860, skilled and unskilled laborers made up about eighty-six percent of the town’s Mexican population. Many were dependent on the rancho elite for a living and stoically accepted their humble position as a normal part of the Mexican social order. Nevertheless, most Hispanic landowners and their workers had an ancient element of reciprocity in their relationship which was rooted in Spanish feudalism. Mexican *patrones* often sponsored weddings, baptisms, and funerals for their employees. They were likely to be chosen as godfathers by their workers, a highly important undertaking in Mexican society that bound them to assume responsibility for the children should their parents die or become disabled. In such manner, certain personal loyalties developed between master and servant that were unknown in American society. This helped the rancho elite to gather the votes of those they employed.

For the most part, working class Mexicans had little interest in politics. *La Estrella de Los Angeles* noticed this fact on October 30, 1852, in a Spanish column written by the editor: “We have seen with pain the great apathy that has existed on the occasion of elections. We have heard with surprise the statements of many people that election results are not important.” Much as Ramirez would later do in the pages of *El Clamor Público*, the editor exhorted ordinary Mexicans in Los Angeles to participate in public affairs and vote for “honest and just men who will attend to your complaints.”

Ramirez was not a member of the rancho elite or the working classes. His family belonged to a small number of agriculturists, merchants, and entrepreneurs

who stood outside the traditional relationship between rancheros and their workers. As a liberal, he tended to align himself with the laboring classes. He hoped to raise their political awareness and induce them to vote for candidates who would somehow reduce discrimination and improve the condition of Spanish-speaking people. Yet few of the Mexican poor subscribed to his newspaper or reflected on the merits of his work. A tremendous apathy existed on the part of most Mexicans toward politics, a fact which helped defeat the aspirations of Ramirez and caused him much personal anguish.

Los Angeles Mexicans failed to support Ramirez for additional reasons. Most would not subscribe to *El Clamor Público*, or any other newspaper, simply because they could not read. In 1850, far less than half of Spanish-speaking adults in Los Angeles were literate. There was also a tendency for Mexicans to move in and out of the city in accordance with

demand for their labor. Only eleven percent of Spanish-speaking families resided continuously in Los Angeles from 1850 to 1880.

In this first issue, *El Clamor Público* was represented as an “independent newspaper, following the banner of no political party or religious sect.” Ramirez wrote that it was “built on the foundation of liberal ideas” and its columns would always be open for “impartial discussion of all public affairs.” It contained only four pages, but the annual subscription rate for fifty-two weekly copies was five dollars. This must have discouraged many Mexican laborers from subscribing since most earned less than a dollar a day.

Despite the purported “independent” position of *El Clamor Público* on political matters, Ramirez immediately used his newspaper to attack the American Party, a growing force in California politics in 1855. The party began in Massachusetts as a protest against a huge wave of Irish immigration to the United States. The American Party advocated restrictions on further immigration to the United States and exclusion of Roman Catholics from public life. It tried to be a secret society whose members were instructed to keep silent on its activities and objectives. Because of this, those belonging to the party were soon called “Know-Nothings.”

In the July 3, 1855, issue of *El Clamor Público*, Ramirez sarcastically wrote that the Know-Nothings were “miserable and fanatic beings” who were intent on destroying the rights of every person “of whatever class or condition who has the *misfortune* to profess the Catholic religion.” He urged his readers not to fall victim to their usual apathy: “Many of you believe that the



Francisco P. Ramirez

right to vote is of little importance and completely fail to do so. But the right you view with so much indifference and lethargy is the only guarantee of our liberty.”

In a July 24 editorial, Ramirez unburdened himself on slavery, an issue that deeply disturbed him. It was the first public expression of his unusually radical views:

The idea of liberty in the United States is truly curious.... Certain people have no liberty at all. It is denied by the courts to every person of color.... But there is the great liberty of any white man to buy a human being in order to arbitrarily hang him or burn him alive. This happens in states where slavery is tolerated and the vilest despotism runs wild—this, in the center of the nation that calls itself a “model republic.”

The next edition had another editorial on slavery in which Ramirez displayed an impressive knowledge of the subject. The Compromise of 1850 and the part Henry Clay played in it was briefly discussed. Ramirez mentioned protests against slavery published by ex-president John Quincy Adams and outlined the development of the abolitionist movement in New England. He deplored the suffering of slaves caused by separation from their families, being sold like animals, and the horrors of severe punishment imposed at the whim of white masters.

These attacks on slavery were not favorably received by most Americans in Los Angeles. A few local people from the northeast quarter of the United States opposed slavery, but their objections were not based on any humane considerations. They thought that bringing slaves into the West would degrade the value of free white labor and reduce wages. Ramirez’s hatred of slavery was consistent with the ideal of racial equality introduced into Mexico by liberals who abolished slavery as early as 1810 and attempted to give full juridical and civil rights to Indians. Although constant warfare between liberals and conservatives impeded such reforms, a belief in racial equality remained fundamental to Mexican liberal ideology and was one of Ramirez’s most deeply held convictions. He was a defender of every racial group in California.

Ramirez published a January 19, 1856, editorial opposing a bill in the legislature to exclude Chinese from the state, saying: “America is a free country and a haven for the oppressed of other nations, and it would not be reasonable or just to close its doors to an industrious people merely because their customs are different from ours and they have another color.” At this time there was virtually no popular support for the Chinese who were willing to work for greatly reduced wages. But beyond being a champion of this maligned group, Ramirez was an almost solitary voice of protest against mistreatment of Indians. Such advanced views on race

directly challenged the pretensions of the *ranchero* elite and repudiated American beliefs in white supremacy.

The radical tone of *El Clamor Público* provoked criticism from the community. Without identifying those responsible or stating the nature of their grievances, on November 6, 1855, Ramirez wrote: “We have been attacked by every means possible...but to those who have done so, both in our presence and outside it, we offer only our contempt.” He defiantly continued, “as journalists, private citizens, and honest men, we have a right to go about with our heads held high and not bow to anyone for any reason.” A few months later, February 2, 1856, Ramirez complained that “some people consider themselves censors of everything written or spoken by the editor and threaten him with death and all manner of tortures worthy of the inquisition.”

American indignation toward *El Clamor Público* may have been mollified during the first year of its existence by occasional articles expressing admiration for the United States and its people. Ramirez felt a close connection with American democracy. He understood that Mexican Liberalism and the United States political system arose from a common European origin. In some respects they were nearly identical, but America had achieved a level of stability and respect for the electoral process that was unknown in Mexico. One of Ramirez’s earliest editorials, July 3, 1855, praised the American Declaration of Independence and presented a remarkably detailed account of the men and events that inspired it, as well as a Spanish translation of the text. Ramirez wrote another laudatory column on August 28 saying that the government of the United States was “formed by men of such greatness and profound wisdom that they have no parallel in history.” Three weeks later, *El Clamor Público* published a short biography of every American president.

There was a strange juxtaposition of articles in the newspaper on May 24, 1856. One article, written by Ramirez, described the phenomenal development of commerce, railroads, and telegraphic systems on the east coast of the United States. This progress toward becoming a world power was attributed to America’s liberal principles and democratic form of government. Immediately next to it was an item reprinted from *El Eco del Pacífico* reporting the slaughter of seventeen Chileans and three Mexicans by an American mob near Coulterville in the gold country. It was the latest in a long series of unpunished atrocities committed by Americans in northern California against the Latin race. The two articles stood side-by-side in utter contrast, one portraying Americans as founders of a great democracy and the other describing them as murderous enemies of Spanish-speaking people. Whether by coincidence or not, this issue marked the end of articles expressing an exalted opinion of the United States. ☆