Dixon was an elk horn 'graveyard'

By Jerry Bowen

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I was looking for something to write about for this week's article when the following caught my eye in a 1968 Centennial issue of the Dixon Tribune.

Referring to the area around Dixon, Ina Baldwin wrote, "A funny thing no one knows about now - before they could turn the soil, they had to clear the land of elk horns - great piles of them, bleached white with age, were raked up and had to be burned. Not even the oldest Spaniard or Indian could remember when there were elk anywhere around. There must have been a great herd of them in Dixon at one time."

Baldwin, the last surviving member of Dixon's founders, the Dickson family, wrote the 1968 letter.

Who were the Dicksons? In a nutshell, the town of Dixon is named after Thomas Dickson. Dickson? ... Dixon? Well, they're both pronounced the same anyway.

Thomas Dickson was born in 1800 in Pennsylvania. In 1830 he married Jane Hood and they established a home in Illinois where a daughter, Elizabeth, was born in 1834. When new lands opened up at Bowens Prairie, Iowa, they moved there and built a comfortable home that Ina Baldwin, Thomas' great-granddaughter described as ". . . a very nice place for those times - a two-story house, all plastered inside."

When California gold fever took hold of Dickson, he once again uprooted the family. He sold their home, bought three wagons, 12 head of oxen, some horses and cows and left for California on April 19, 1853, with the Edwards Wagon Train. By that time the family had grown to one daughter (Ina Baldwin's grandmother, Martha), four sons (William, Henry, Nathan and James), and with another child the way. They headed for the "promised land." About halfway to California, Evaline Dickson was born on July 13, 1853.

They finally arrived in Hangtown (Placerville) on Oct. 13, 1853, and settled temporarily at nearby Diamond Springs while Thomas tried his hand at gold mining. They relocated to Silveyville in Solano County later in the same year. Apparently gold mining wasn't up to Dickson's expectations.

Silveyville originally had been established as a "Halfway House Hotel and Saloon" by Elijah Silvey in 1852. Silvey's hotel was in the middle of nowhere at the time but was

located on or near the road many gold miners used on their way to the mines. At night Elijah placed a red lantern high up on a pole to aid travelers in finding his location. Evidently it worked well because for a few years he prospered and the town of Silveyville began to grow.

Meanwhile, Thomas Dickson filed on, and received, a quarter section of land that includes today's Dixon within its southern border.

In 1867, Thomas Dickson decided to settle in the Dixon area where the "wild oats could be crossed over a pony's back." At about the same time, he donated 10 cares to the railroad for a depot and other purposes. In 1868 the railroad through Dickson's land was in full operation with a depot called Dickson's Station.

W. R. Ferguson of Maine Prairie bought an acre from Dickson and built a house on it including a store that he opened for business on July 7, 1868. The community of Dickson's Station was officially started. With the railroad bypassing Silveyville, Maine Prairie and Batavia, more firms made the move to Dickson's Station and soon the growing town was dubbed Dicksonville or simply Dicksons.

There are two stories circulating about how the spelling of the town ended up as Dixon.

One states that a consignment of goods was sent to the new town addressed to W. R. Ferguson, Dixon. After a period of time the spelling "Dixon" became the accepted version for the name of the town.

The other and most accepted story is that the sign on the Railroad Depot was misspelled "Dixon" and because time tables, advertisements, and other literature was already printed with that name they decided to just leave it as it was. In fact, even Thomas Dickson agreed to it.

The town of Dixon continued to grow, and by 1870 it had 317 citizens, 40 businesses, and lots sold for $400 to $500.

Silveyville continued to hang on until about 1871 but it was no use competing with a new town that had a railroad depot. So the folks of Silveyville and other nearby communities did what was necessary, they moved their homes and businesses; lock, stock and barrel to Dixon.

It was quite an operation. Placing the buildings on steel platforms and girders, they rolled the structures on logs, removing the rearmost logs and putting them in front as they were pulled by horse teams to their new sites. The whole operation was guided by the able efforts of Peter Timm, a local rancher and dairyman. Many years later his

grandson Olin wrote, "I remember my grandmother showing me the rollers he (Peter Timm) used, stored in the barn. I did not see the flat cars and steel rails described by Helene Kirby Rohwer's aunt, Mary Little, that were also used."

Buildings at Maine Prairie were also removed and rebuilt at the burgeoning new town. Warehouses and new businesses were constructed and Dixon was a booming railroad town in full swing.

Dixon has experienced many changes over the years. Earthquakes and fires have changed the face of the town and destroyed most of its earliest structures. Removal of others to make way for new development has destroyed more of the visible past of the town. The city, now bulging at the seams with new growth, still has a quaint downtown and many older homes that an interested visitor can enjoy. Let's hope the folks that want to restore and maintain the past history of Dixon are successful in retaining some of the old charm of Dickson's Station. It's worth the effort.