

Leonard W. Buck a Vaca treasure

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Few people influenced Vacaville's early economic success and history as much as Leonard W. Buck.

Born on July 8, 1834, in Cortland County, N.Y., he attended the historic Cortland Academy. He married Anna Bellows, daughter of Dr. M. B. Bellows, a physician, on Sept. 10, 1856. Two of their children, Emma L. and Frank H. Buck, were born in Cortland in the ensuing years.

During the Civil War, Leonard joined Company H, 157th New York Volunteer Infantry and soon was promoted to first lieutenant. He was discharged in February of 1863 on account of ill health.

The family then moved westward to Clinton, Iowa, where Leonard was involved in the lumber trade and in the hardware and grocery business.

In 1874, Leonard traveled to California and, after a visit to Solano County, decided to move his family out to settle in the Vacaville area. His first land purchase consisted of the Long Ranch, or former Weldon Ranch, 107 acres in Vaca Valley.

This was a time of transition in farming, changing from large acreages of wheat to the orchards for which the area would become famous.

Leonard threw himself wholeheartedly into the orchard business. Through the advent of the transcontinental railroad, growers finally could reach the East Coast markets. His earlier merchandising background had given him the necessary contacts, and he became one of the first growers to ship his produce to the East Coast.

The first carload of grapes ever sent out of Vaca Valley to Chicago was packed by him in 1876. The grapes were shipped in a so-called Miller patent ice car, with ice being packed at one end and cold air blown over the crates through a blowing apparatus attached to the axles. The fruit arrived in perfect condition. Transportation cost for the wagon reached \$1,800, but the fruit sold for \$3,500.

By 1879, his landholdings had increased to 156 acres, 90 of which were under cultivation. He was reputed to have 27,000 vines, half of which he had just set out that very spring. He was especially known for his 125 orange and lemon trees.

The Vacaville Reporter named Leonard Buck as one of the richest and most productive farmers of Solano County on August 30, 1884, "adapted to the cultivation of every agricultural product that can be grown, including all the semi-tropic fruits, but just now horticulture and viticulture are so profitable that no cereals are produced, and almost every available spot blossoms with a vine or is rooted with a fruit tree. His residence is very pleasantly located, and commands a pretty view of the valley, ...

"There are 500 almond, 200 peach, 100 pear, 500 plum, 1,500 apricot, 1,000 cherries and 1,000 apples, nectarines and prunes. Besides these, there are 30,000 vines of the Muscat, Tokay, Rose of Peru, Fontaine Bleau (sic) Cornuchon and Emperor varieties (these are all table grapes.) The peaches are mostly of the Susquehanna variety and of a very superior size and flavor. A part of them have already been engaged to a Chicago firm, at a fancy price; ..."

In 1888, William Nutting recorded that Leonard Buck had added another 147 acres, purchased from Mason Wilson at \$600 per acre. Nutting added: "The place, which is managed by Frank H. Buck (Leonard's eldest son), includes 35 acres of shipping grapes, Muscats and Tokays, which, at three years old, yielded about five tons to the acre; 45 acres of peaches, which, at three years old, yielded about two and one-half ton to the acre; 30 acres of French prunes and 30 acres of Bartlett pears which are now (April 1888), beginning their fourth year's growth and show some fruit. In the planting of this place by Mr. Wilson, the different kinds of fruits were so arranged that in laying it off in small tracts each subdivision should have a variety of fruits. The tract adjoins the town on the west and a continuation of the main street of the town will constitute a fine avenue through it." Nutting's observation (or a conversation with Leonard Buck?) was prophetic - on June 3, 1889, the "fine avenue" was dedicated as Buck Avenue.

The volume of fruit produced inevitably led Leonard and Frank H. Buck into the packing and shipping business. In 1880, Leonard Buck established the California Fruit Shipping Association with headquarters in San Francisco. In the following year, he founded the L. W. & F. H. Buck company.

During his later years, he also found the energy to serve his community in other functions. In 1886, he was elected to the senate of the California legislature as a member of the Democratic Party. "His service was characterized by the same excellent judgment and thorough understanding of the requirements of his community which was noticeable throughout his entire career," remarked Prof. J. M. Guinn in a biographical essay in 1904.

Throughout his life, Leonard Buck's main focus centered on the development of the fruit industry in Solano County. He was regarded as one of the leading authorities in pomology (the scientific study and cultivation of fruit) in California. On March 27, 1889,

he was appointed as a member of the State Board of Horticulture for the Second Horticultural District, which included Napa, Solano, and Contra Costa counties. He served on this board until his death in 1895.

Prof. Guinn noted that "During his connection with the board, Mr. Buck displayed the vigor and energy which characterized all his pursuits. A thorough horticulturist, he had for years devoted all his energies to his chosen calling and mastered it in every detail; at the same time he was a thorough businessman, a combination of talents too seldom found in connection, and he made a business of fruitgrowing and prosecuted it to success. This rare combination of enthusiasm and practical business acumen he brought with him to the commission. Loving his calling, fully realizing its possibilities, he was not alone willing, but anxious, to aid all others in the same line, and so gave his time, his knowledge and his influence freely, and without any hope of compensation, other than the pleasure it afforded him, to the work to which he had been appointed. No more fitting appointment could have been made, for with his great force of character, his strong personal influence, backed by his knowledge and ability, he gave an impetus to the work of the commission and through it to the horticultural interests of the state which is still felt and will leave its influence for all time."

The regard that Leonard Buck was held in is also evident in the resolution the State Board of Horticulture passed after his death in June of 1895:

"... therefore, be it resolved, that in the death of ex-Senator Buck the horticulturists of the state have lost a steadfast friend and the state a faithful servant; and, not only do these facts apply to the state, but the United States has lost one of its most energetic and progressive citizens."

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