

Trial and error determined success of orchards

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Monday, March 27, 2000

Orchards have been a part of Solano County's landscape for more than 150 years. Beginning with the first pioneers, settlers brought in plants, exchanged seeds and cuttings with friends and neighbors, experimented with different varieties to see how these adapted to the soil and climate, or even tried to create new strains and varieties.

In July 1842, John Reed Wolfskill reached Putah Creek and settled on a land grant belonging to his brother, William Wolfskill, a Mexican citizen of the Los Angeles area.

William Wolfskill gave his brother a number of seeds, plants and plant cuttings on the way, and John Wolfskill quickly established a well-stocked garden. Among others, he brought apricot, figs, olives, pecans, pomegranates and even palm trees to the area. He experimented with two dry date seeds from which he eventually harvested the first commercial crop of dates in the United States.

Besides the Vaca and Pena families, who kept small vineyards both for fresh fruit and for winemaking, John Wolfskill was the first settler to plant Mission grapes in the area. He also encouraged other residents to cultivate grapes and fruit trees, sharing his knowledge, plant cuttings and even tools with them.

The Solano County Herald recognized his and his brother Matthew's contribution to establishing fruit orchards in an article on Aug. 23, 1856: "We are indebted to Messrs. Wolskill (sic) of the Putah, for some of the finest specimens of fruit that we have seen for many a long day. Grapes, peaches, pears and figs are raised by them in abundance, and all of the finest quality. No pains are spared by Mr. Wolskill in the culture of his fruit, and we are glad that his labor has been so amply rewarded. We hope to see the day that our valleys, in this vicinity, will be one great fruit garden; and to this end, none have contributed more than these pioneers of the fruit business."

Years after John Wolfskill's death, his daughter Frances willed 107 acres of the property to the University of California, Davis, for an experimental agricultural station, thus preserving the memory of Solano County's first orchardist.

It took much hard work, experimentation and patience to establish what would become known as the "Vacaville Early Fruit Belt" only a few years later.

Where did the fruit ripen first each year? After much observation, it was shown that the

first fruit came from hillsides where the sun reached the trees ever so much earlier than down in the valley. Canyon openings along the Vaca and Pleasants Valley were thought to be the best growing areas, as the constant light wind flowing through them also prevented frost early in the growing season.

During the 1860s, many types of apples and peaches proved popular. In his report for 1866, the Solano County assessor noted that of the county's 71,045 fruit trees some 20,780 were apple and 28,640 were peach. But the same mild winters which permitted Vacaville railroad shipments to reach eastern markets weeks ahead of all competitors were too warm for the cultivation of apple orchards. By 1880, the apricot had replaced the apple as the region's second most important fruit next to the peach.

Much experimentation went into finding the best rootstock suited to the hot, dry summers. At one time, orchardists even imported North African almond rootstock to see if it would prove especially adept to dry farming.

Another necessary aspect was the ability of fruit to travel well, and here too, the area's orchardists were successful.

The Solano Republican could write on Sept. 21, 1883: "The fruit grown in this section is not, however, recommended by its earliness chiefly, but has for the shipper and canner qualities that make it worth double the price of fruit grown in any other locality. The warm, dry climate of the fruit belt produces fruit and grapes with an extremely tough skin and flesh of the finest grain, and a remarkable concentration of juices, producing the highest flavor and at the same time can be kept longer and bear longer transportation than any fruit grown elsewhere in the state."

Other orchardists went even further and experimented with unusual crops in their search to see what would grow best in the area. The Vacaville Reporter noted on Jan. 26, 1895: "Last Tuesday W.W. Smith, one of our extensive fruit raisers, received from Louisiana a specimen of fruit new to California which he called a casabana.

"We are informed that it is of the banana family and that it ought to thrive well in this state as the thermometer runs several degrees lower in Louisiana; where it grows successfully than in California (sic). It was imported from India where it is a native.

"In appearance it strongly resembles, in the green state, an enormous cucumber or straight squash. When ripe it is a deep cherry red and is reported as being excellent, also making fine preserves.

"Mr. Smith will plant the seed and test the qualities of the fruit and also its adaptability to the soil in this section of California. His experiment will be watched with much

interest.”

As the Reporter never mentioned casabanas again, we can assume that this experiment failed.

Another fruit experiment that never caught on were the Ziziphus jujuba trees Luther Harbison planted in 1913 and 1914.

Also called Chinese dates, the trees had been sent to him by the United States Department of Agriculture, followed by a letter in 1915 with the recipe for preserving the jujube fruit with honey.

Called “Mi tsao” or honey jujube, this was a Chinese delicacy, and both Luther Harbison and the Department of Agriculture hoped that the product would prove marketable. While this never happened, one of the jujube trees still produces fruit today.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/13>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/13/>