

Pioneer settler wanted land, not gold

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, September 15, 2002

Though he was born in Orange County, Va., on May 30, 1808, he grew up in Kentucky. Like many young frontier men, he felt the urge to move further west. The year 1830 found him as a farmer in New London, Miss., where he married Cornelia Catherine Lamme, a great-granddaughter of Daniel Boone, on Jan. 19, 1830.

Though he was by then a well-established farmer, who had already amassed a considerable fortune, the lure of the west won out. In 1849 (or possibly as late as 1851) he crossed the plains as a wagon train scout, presumably to the Sacramento area. Gold did not attract him - he searched for good farming soil and quickly purchased a sizable acreage of the original Rancho De Los Putos grant held by the Vaca family.

In the meantime, his son Arculus Cobbler Hawkins Jr. was born in Missouri on Aug. 9, 1849. It took another three years before the family finally moved out in 1852, to settle in the Vacaville area.

Like many early settlers, Arculus initially ran cattle, selling it for hides and tallow. He also leased land in the Colusa area to grow wheat. At some point early on, he planted his first small orchard with peaches and apricots.

He seems to have been very successful and was very influential in the development of Vacaville. The year 1869 finds him elected as one of the directors of the Vaca Valley Railroad Co.

Bringing this railroad spur from the California Pacific Railroad, which crossed through Solano County to Vacaville, helped gain local farmers immediate access to East Coast markets.

A few years later, he was named in newspapers among the "Nabobs," local farmers and businessman who were assessed more than \$10,000 for tax purposes.

Early on, in 1854 or 1855, the Disciples of Christ, or Christians, founded their first church with 11 members, Arculus Hawkins and his family among them. His ranch served as the first meeting place, until he was able to purchase a site in downtown Vacaville several years later and donate it to the church.

For decades, the Christian Church stood on this site, which was located opposite the

Raleigh Hotel.

In 1891, Hawkin's church building was replaced by a new L-shaped building with an 85-foot-high bell tower. The building contract was awarded to local builder George Sharpe for a bid of \$4,975. He built the church in 90 days.

The fire that destroyed the Raleigh Hotel in 1909 also ignited the redwood shingles that covered the church. The bell tower collapsed, but the rest of the building was saved.

The Vacaville-Elmira Cemetery provides us with another memory of Arculus C. Hawkins' contributions to the community - he donated part of his land toward its establishment.

He died at his home on July 8, 1895. His obituary on July 13 in the Vacaville Reporter tells the following story:

"He was a man of phenomenal physique and many stories are current of his power as a wrestler and runner. An anecdote will illustrate his character.

"While running a threshing outfit, at a time when he was between 60 and 70, he bantered any of his men to wrestle him for his harvest wages, if he lost agreeing to pay double, and if he won he was to pay nothing. The challenge was quickly taken by a sturdy Irishman named Mike. It took but a minute for the Irishman to find that Uncle Arculus was a better man.

"The defeated wrestler worked the season through, but when the old gentleman was paying off, did not go to the house for his money. Mr. Hawkins sent for him and offered his summer's wages.

" 'Sir,' said Mike, 'I lost fairly and I claim nothing.'

" 'O Mike,' said Mr. Hawkins, 'it is easy for a Missourian to outwrestle an Irishman. Here is your money,' and it was paid."

His only son, Arculus Cobbler Jr., married Margaret Jane Ellis on Dec. 21, 1870. The bride came from the Suisun Valley area. They had one son, Chauncey Jedidiah, who was born on Sept. 3, 1875. Unfortunately, Arculus Jr. died young, in April 1878, most likely from tuberculosis. His widow decided to move back to Suisun Valley and to lease the Vacaville Ranch.

Chauncey was a serious child. He loved to read and explore the outdoors hiking and hunting. He also was actively involved in drama and was an accomplished flautist.

During the 1890s, he attended Napa College and graduated from the University of the Pacific in 1896, at age 20. He then attended Yale University and graduated with a doctor of divinity degree.

He served as a Congregational pastor in churches from New Haven, Boston, Seattle to the First Congregational Church in San Francisco in 1927. He was nationally recognized as a liberal innovator who opened church doors to secular activities and argued that the church's teachings had to be relevant to the modern world.

"He was one of the first Seattle ministers to realize the changing times and opportunity for combating the more worldly attractions in their own field," an unidentified friend is quoted in Hawkins' obituary of 1930 in the Vacaville Reporter.

"He was instrumental in organizing semi-religious organizations, such as cultural clubs, stellar musical and lecture programs at this church (in Seattle); book reviews on Sunday evenings, and in preaching special sermons such as after-the-curtain services for his actor and actress friends."

Chauncey Hawkins enjoyed the theater and stage world and counted many artists among his friends.

"Many times vaudeville 'hoofers' and chorus girls, concert singers and stock company tragedians have hurried through their post-show greasepaint removal in order to hurry to Seattle's 'church with heart' for a midnight Easter service or a Christmas Eve worship," continued the friend in the obituary.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Chauncey Hawkins was part of the Chautauqua educational shows for several years, giving lectures on a variety of topics ranging from nature to theology.

He also was a respected author, both for adults and for children. His children's books drew on his own childhood memories of roaming the hills of Solano County. His adult books and treatises covered a broad range of topics. In his last book, "Do the Churches Dare?" published in 1919, he questioned the rejection of modern science by fundamentalist churches.

While Chauncey Hawkins never lived in Vacaville, he kept the family ranch and had it managed by K.Inai. The ranch served as a retreat for him, his wife Jessie, and their two sons, Philip and Robert.

Many of his books were written in Vacaville. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by an auto accident in 1930. His two sons, who were riding with him, miraculously survived.

This article was inspired by a wonderful collection of photographs, letters and catalogs donated by Mimi Hawkins to the Vacaville Museum.

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