

Legends, myths a part of Rockville

By Jerry Bowen

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What is known today as Rockville Corners was once a thriving little village in the mid-1850s. Before that, it was a major encampment and settlement of the Suisun Indians before they were almost completely wiped out by smallpox from 1837 to 1839.

An Indian, Jesus Molino, had the only house in the vicinity when Captain E. H. Von Pfister passed through the area in the fall of 1847. He found about 100 acres under cultivation by tools described as being very primitive. The plow was the "crooked branch of a tree armed with a pointed iron socket."

Early in the spring of 1850, pioneers including Samuel Martin and family, Dr. Boone and his wife and a Mr. and Mrs. Smith and family arrived in Suisun Valley and camped near what is now Rockville. The party, one of the first to settle in the valley, was attracted to the fertile soil that produced wild oats of an astonishing height.

During the first night that the Martin party camped in the area, the youngest member of the party became ill. Dr. Boone treated the child by bathing it in warm water. For some reason the treatment frightened the Indians who stood around watching, thinking the cure was an act of the devil, and they ran away. The next morning, wondering where they had gone, Samuel Martin went into their quarters and found Chief Solano in bed and very ill.

The chief was suffering with pneumonia, which eventually caused his death. Prior to that, however, Martin visited him frequently and in the months that followed helped nurse him and eventually helped bury him when he died. The burial place was a short distance south of an old buckeye tree that stood on the east side of today's Suisun Valley Road across from the Samuel Martin house, often referred to as the Stonedene Mansion.

When the chief was buried, a wooden cross, supported by stones, was placed above his grave. In the course of time the cross decayed, fell away and all signs of it disappeared.

In 1879, when all signs of the burial ground had been obliterated by time and the elements, an orchard was planted there. When the ground was plowed, Indian remains were found, including Solano's, which was not disturbed. Today the buckeye tree is long gone and the gravesite lies under the grounds of Solano Community College.

The Rockville Stone Chapel

By 1852, Suisun Valley Creek, where baptism by total immersion was practiced, had become an accepted spot for summer camp meetings. The settlers gathered from afar with their tents and cookstoves to spend a week of religious pursuit. Circuit riders preached at the meetings and services lasted into the night. In 1854, some \$5,000 was raised at the campouts to build a permanent structure, the Rockville Stone Chapel.

Landy and Sarah Alford donated 5 acres for the site of the church and a cemetery. The church was erected by volunteer labor, led by stonemasons Joel Price and George Whitely, and the rock used was quarried from the adjacent hills.

The cornerstone was laid Oct. 3, 1856, by the Rev. Sylvester Woodbridge of Benicia, followed by the Reverends Morris Evans and Orcenith Fisher, who formally dedicated it in February 1857. Rev. Fisher became known as the "Son of Thunder" because he was accustomed to delivering his sermons in the open and his booming voice would thunder and echo off the bare stone walls of the church.

Many pioneers were pro-slavery Southerners, and that caused a split in the Methodist Episcopal Church. One Sunday in 1863, Northerners insulted the Southerners by singing the "Battle Cry of Freedom," and the Southerners retaliated by installing a stone plaque reading "M.E. Church South 1856." The affronted and outnumbered Northerners decided that it was better to worship elsewhere.

The first white burial in the cemetery was the Alfords' 3-year-old daughter in December 1856, followed by many of the historical figures we read about today. Donations of land from Lewis Pierce and J.M. and Caroline Baldwin later expanded the historic cemetery.

Regular services were held in the chapel until 1895 and occasional services until 1919. The building gradually fell into disrepair except for the stone walls, which had withstood the 1906 earthquake. In 1929 the reunited Methodist Episcopal Church deeded it to the Rockville Public Cemetery District on condition that it be restored as a pioneer monument, which was accomplished in 1940.

The Baldwin Stone Barn

According to a story written in the Solano Republican by Rosa Lee Baldwin in 1937, J.M. Baldwin gave an old Spaniard named "Chico" \$50,000 for what was supposedly his land grant. Baldwin then gave Chico permission to build a cabin on a corner of the Baldwin ranch. As the story goes, Chico lived for many years, but it always remained a mystery as to what became of his fortune when he passed on.

She wrote, "How Mr. Baldwin would chuckle, as he often related the many unsuccessful pick and shovel expeditions by the youth of the vicinity, as they proceeded to dig for the buried treasure on the Baldwin estate."

But deeds on file show no such transaction and there was no such grant owned by a "Chico," so the story is evidently nothing more than a myth possibly conjured up for the entertainment of the young treasure hunters.

In 1865, the Baldwin's built a stone barn and the cornerstone was laid with great ceremony. It contained an infant photograph of Katie Baldwin, money coined in 1865 in denominations of 20-, 10-, five, and two-and-one-half- dollar gold pieces, paper money, and newspapers.

Years later, the Baldwin boys begged William Higgins to be let in on the secret location of that corner-stone. But Higgins, a young man employed on the Baldwin ranch at the time and who was present at the ceremony, revealed nothing. In fact, he never revealed the location to his dying day. The barn is in excellent condition to this day and still in use.

Bloody Gulch

The Baldwin boys were uprooting some old tree stumps on an adjacent ranch one day when they unearthed two human skeletons, clinching each other, with the rusty blade of a sword grasped in each skeleton hand. The excited boys rushed home to relate their experience.

Mother Baldwin solved the mystery by telling the boys the story of "Bloody Gulch"- a strip of low land, including portions of the Sam Scarlett, Morrison Drake and Hatch ranches. It happened that about the time Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin arrived in the valley to establish their home, women were very much in the minority in the surrounding districts and neighboring farms; consequently great rivalry took place for the ladies' favors.

When a dispute arose over a lady's favor that couldn't be settled by peaceful means, the contenders chose their "seconds" and headed for "Bloody Gulch" to fight it out. According to Mrs. Baldwin, that is how that strip of land acquired its gruesome name.

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