

Early settlers took golden side trip

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, we left the Barbours and the Alfords in Sonoma, building homes after a rigorous trip across the continent to California. A chance meeting with another Solano County historical figure, Thomas O. Larkin, resulted in a complete change of plans for the two families.

Larkin and Robert Semple were busy in 1847, promoting the new town of Benicia, and they needed people to settle there as part of an agreement for the land from Mariano Vallejo.

Larkin offered Barbour and Alford lots in Benicia if they would move there. He promised to pay all expenses, and according to one account, offered \$1,000 to each, although this seems like an enormous amount of money for the times.

Both men accepted the offer and transported their incomplete homes to the budding new community in October 1847. Barbour built his home near the east corner of First and E streets and Alford across the alley near the east corner of First and F streets. They weren't big homes by any means; only measuring 18 feet by 16 feet, but they was adequate for their needs.

Lots in Benicia sold for \$20 initially but as soon as a few homes were built the price jumped to \$50 a lot.

Barbour put his skills as a carpenter to use and built a few homes for others and was hired to obtain lumber for, and to oversee, the building of the Solano Hotel on west side of the corner of First and F streets. According to the family history, he apparently wound up owning it.

Many politicians resided at the hotel during the period that Benicia was the state's capital. The old hotel register contains many famous names including Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, John Sutter and Judge Hastings of Hastings Law School fame. In later years the old hotel served as a rooming house, bar and house of prostitution. Fire razed it in 1931 and today the site houses antique shops.

In a family history compiled by descendant Christie Barbour, she reminisced, "Grandma Edna Barbour used to recall a family legend concerning two aspects of this hotel. The first was that the saloon's bar had holes in it to accommodate cow or buffalo

horns, which were used due to the lack of glassware. The holes permitted the horns to stand upright. The use of 'two fingers' or 'three fingers' to measure the size of the drink poured into the horns was also recalled. The other aspect concerned Nathan (Barbour)'s insistence that a debtor pay his bill. To be nasty, the debtor did so, but with a barrel of small change. However, immediately thereafter, and as the population increased, an acute shortage of small change allowed Nathan Barbour to make a further profit as a moneychanger."

In 1847, Nathan and Nancy Barbour's first child, Armelia, was the first white baby born in the new town of Benicia, followed by her brother Eli, the first male white child, who was born Oct. 1, 1849.

But their lives were about to change once again. Gold was discovered in January 1848 at Coloma. In May of the same year, several of the locals were jawbonin' at Von Pfister's store in Benicia when Charles Bennett stopped at the store and during the conversation with locals he let out the word about the discovery.

Nathan joined the masses headed to the rich gold mines, loaded up his wife and two young children and traveled to Hangtown (Placerville). Nathan was among the lucky early arrivals and succeeded in mining \$5,000 in gold. As a matter of fact, he made the entire amount with just two wagonloads of pay dirt, according to the family historian Christie Barbour. His wife also did very well as a novice miner by picking up several hundred dollars' worth of nuggets. She saved many of the nuggets and later divided them among her children.

The gold mining venture was cut short when Nancy Nathan's health began to fail and they decided to return to Benicia.

During the return trip they passed through Suisun Valley. Nathan noted the richness of the soil and took note of the great height the native grasses grew. If fact, he was so impressed with Suisun Valley he bought 240 acres on Suisun Creek in 1858.

He built a beautiful stone house in 1859 that was constructed much like the Stonedene Mansion and Rockville Church. The Robbins family owned the residence in the 1970s. The area was rapidly being subdivided and the Solano Community College was located nearby. All concerns about area growth and whether or not the historic old home would survive the development that was closing in were dashed when a fire on May 16, 1986, ravaged it to the point that it eventually had to be torn down.

Soon after his purchase, Nathan Barbour sent back east for a variety of fruit trees and seeds and planted apples, peaches and pears. Hard work followed in preparing the land by removing the native trees and rocks so he could cultivate the soil. When his first

crop of apples matured, they sold for a very high price of one dollar each and cider for \$3 a glass!

He later enlarged his lucrative business by acquiring two ranches in the Montezuma Hills, one a grain ranch of 1,022 acres, another of 1,200 acres. He also bought 380 acres in Putah Creek canyon where he raised early fruit and vegetables. This ranch in later years was known as the Sackett Ranch.

Mrs. Barbour passed away on Oct. 15, 1868, at 49 years of age, while Nathan survived her by several years, dying March 3, 1881.

They were the parents of the nine children: Armelia, Eli; Nancy, Nathan R., Julia, Nellie, May, and Florence, and Kate.

Their eighth child, Florence, was killed in a shipwreck Feb. 28, 1886, in Honolulu, Hawaii. She had been on the trip in hopes of regaining her health when the ship, Planter, struck rocks in 6 feet of water and heeled over on its side, waves inundating the ship. Florence was asleep in her cabin and according to a newspaper article the severity of the shock caused her lungs to hemorrhage, leading to her death a few days later. Her body was returned to Suisun Valley and she was buried at Rockville Cemetery.

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