

Gold Rushed Vacaville's Beginning

By Jerry Bowen

Monday, April 17, 2000

Gold has been described in a host of fanciful terms. It has been said to be the folly of man, the savior of civilization, a barbarous relic, the root of all evil and the symbol of perfection.

Gold first was discovered in California on either Jan. 19 or 24, 1848, by James Marshall at Coloma. The actual date is still somewhat in question even today.

Right?

Not necessarily so. Not only that, but what does that have to do with Solano County and Vacaville?

Old records indicate that gold either was suspected to be in the lands of California or known to actually exist for many decades before the Marshall discovery.

Perhaps the 1840 gold discovery in California in the Los Angeles area would have started the Gold Rush had there been better communication with the outside world. And Juan Manuel Vaca had a minor involvement in it.

A man named Francisco Lopez found gold in onion roots in the San Fernando Valley in 1840. Evidently Juan Manuel Vaca either knew Lopez or learned of the discovery while he was in Los Angeles. Vaca was the first to carry the news to Gov. Alvarado at Monterey, presenting him with an ounce of gold contained in quills. Gov. Alverado had a pair of earrings made for his wife and a ring for his eldest daughter out of the gold.

Vaca may have had a small part in an earlier discovery, but the real importance to the beginning of Vacaville was the rush which began in 1848 and brought people into the area.

Gold wasn't the reason people stayed here. It was the land, water and climate, important ingredients for building a lasting community. Several miners passed through this gateway to the gold country, then returned after their fling at fortune (or misfortune) to settle here rather than return to the East or their home country.

Passing through Vaca Valley, they observed an area covered in bunch grass and wild oats growing taller than they had ever seen. There were few trees due to frequent fires

and the grazing of an abundant deer population. The low mountain range and hillsides were covered mostly with chaparral and occasional clumps of oak, pitch-pine, ash and cottonwood trees scattered about.

More trees were found along the banks of the streams in the area. The land was ripe for agricultural use, with its open terrain and climate. Some of the argonauts left the disappointments of the mines behind and settled here to pursue ranching and farming. Others spread the word about the Vacaville area when they returned to their homes back East.

Among Vacaville's earliest arrivals (before 1849) besides Vaca and Pena were cattlemen Albert Lyon, John Patton, J.P. Willis, Mr. Hollingsworth and Clay Long. About 1849, more relatives of Clay Long and Marshal Bayse settled here, followed in 1850 by Dollarhide and his three sons. The wives of Hollingsworth and Lyon were the only two women in the area in 1850. Hollingsworth was killed by Indians while he was on a prospecting trip in 1848. His family remained in Vaca Valley for about a dozen years before moving back East.

William McDaniel is credited with erecting the first building in Vacaville, followed by a ramshackle hotel built by James McGuire. Both buildings were constructed in 1850 before the survey and filing of McDaniel & Mizner's original "Mapa de la Villa de Vacaville" in December 1851. The first store, opened in 1852 by E.F. Gillespie, was located in a tool shed that had been built by Mason Wilson. Gillespie later built a more substantial structure on the corner of Elizabeth and Main streets. Luzena Wilson began her hotel enterprise with an "open-air" hotel in 1852.

In 1850, the old trail from Benicia to Sacramento passed by Vaca's home and entered Vacaville near the corner of today's Parker and Merchant streets. It followed Merchant to Dobbins where it branched north to Wolfskill's ranch. The other branch continued on today's Merchant to Main streets, crossed Ulatis Creek, making its way to then-Sacramento Road (now East Monte Vista Avenue) and on to Sacramento.

Due to flooding in the swampy area near Davis, the route via Wolfskill's ranch and Cache Creek was used in the winter to get to Sacramento through the now nonexistent villages of Fremont and Vernon, then south to the city.

This old route through the Vaca Valley accounts for the angled entry into Vacaville and the resultant triangle-shaped blocks we know today. The route also shaped the town's layout in violation of the original 1851 Vacaville map. As settlers purchased land in and around Vacaville, new maps were filed further adding to and changing the original plan for the town. The Parker Addition, Bucks Addition, Wilson's Addition and others added to and changed the town layout over the years. An "Official Map of the Town of

Vacaville" was filed in 1896, reflecting the changes up to that time.

It was far different than what Vaca had envisioned when he sold the land to McDaniel. Unfortunately, Vaca died in 1858, the same year his land grant finally was approved by the U S. Land Commission. This may account for some of the deviation from the original plan because of the uncertainties of land ownership before the final settlement of the land grant. Which town lots - 1,055, according to the original deal with McDaniel - Vaca decided to keep for himself is unknown. Details of purchases and transfers to new owners is a subject that would make an interesting research project.

Today, even the exact location of Vaca's original home has faded from memory, along with his dream. But the Vaca name lives on in the town, a reminder of his legacy to the future.

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