

Documents a prelude to life in Solano

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, June 22, 2003

Not often do I find documents that offer insight into the whereabouts of a local pioneer family before members settled in Solano County. Fortunately, this is the case with the family of Carrie Pittman, whose grandson, William Smith, preserved letters, deeds and other documents currently on loan to the Vacaville Museum.

The earliest document is a letter of Stepn May (his full first name remains unknown) to his wife, Jane, written "Saturday evening 5 O'clock, September 22nd, 1827." (Stepn and Jane May's sixth child and only daughter, Louisa, would eventually marry Charles John Pittmann; Carrie was their only child.)

The letter was addressed to the family's home at 10 N. Dyer St. in Bristol, England. Mr. May seemed to have been on a business voyage to Swansea, Glamorganshire. He had taken the packet and described (with creative spelling) a difficult sea passage. "After a very ruff Voige I arrived safe heare 7 o'clock last evening.... we had to go against wind and tide and the sea had a great swell that at times it was doutfull whether we shoulded not be kept at sea all knight ... I was very sick all the afternoon ... I never saw shuch a scene of vomiting before ... my breath was bitin and I was very well abel to walk in search of lodgings, I had a good knights rest and am beter today, have walked a good deal, I have a sitting room, as large as our parlour, a bedroom as large and as good as our own in a very clean house.... "

While it is unclear what his occupation was, he seems to have been quite affluent, judging by the comfortable rental rooms he occupied.

Mr. May was concerned about his absence from home where he expected some sort of difficulty to occur. "... my earnest prayers for you is that the Lord may be present with you and very [sic] to you giving you strength equal to your day of trial. I long to be home to share the burden with you..."

This letter must have been important to their daughter, Louisa, for her to preserve it - maybe the "day of trial" was her own birth. (Although her birth date is not known, 1827 seems a likely year, making her three years younger than her future husband.) Mr. May must have died a short time thereafter, explaining the handwritten note on the letter "Dear Fathers [sic] last letter to our poor dear Mother."

Louisa also kept several letters written to her by friends before she got engaged to

Charles Pittman. None are dated, nor are the senders identified, but sentiments and use of language allow a little insight into British middle-class life around 1850.

In one letter, Louisa is invited "Thursday evening to partake of a cold collation etc. to celebrate the Wedding. Shall be most happy of your company if you will oblige which I think you will as your friend Mr. Lindsey is to be amongst us....".

Her friend, Tenny, opened her letter with typical inquiries: "I feel very anxious to hear from you to know what you are about and how your dearself is in health which I am sure you cannot be well for the weather is so warm that it makes me quite ill ... I often think of you when I am alone for my Grandpa is in the Country and will stay about 2 months so Grandma and I shall be quite alone."

Though these are just a few snippets of information, they once again convey a solid, seemingly affluent middle-class background, able to afford parties and extended summer stays in the country.

Charles Pittman, Louisa's future husband, seems to have come from a similarly situated family. He was born in Bristol, on November 18, 1824, as the oldest of five children.

Nothing is known about his father, though his mother, Elizabeth, seems to have been widowed by 1855. In a letter to Charles and Louisa, written on May 31, 1855, she said (with creative spellings): "... my Dear Son, don't you make yoursel uneasy about me ... Respecting the money I have not tuch that you left me in the Bank and it is for your servas at eney day ... if I could send it safe to you you always know you always been my frend and God will reward you for it ... you hovnt never want if you look to him .. he provides for the Fatherless and the widow."

Charles Pittman seems to have been a restless young man. He received an education in the schools of Bristol. Bristol was one of the major shipping ports at the time, and one can imagine him dreaming of adventures in faraway lands. Around 1840, at age 16, he left his family to travel to the Far East and to the West Indies. It is unclear whether he sailed as a paying passenger or as hired crew.

He finally settled down in New York City and opened a haberdashers business, which he managed as the New York branch of his brother's, William's, establishment in Bristol. Family memory also mentions him being a tea merchant around 1844.

At some point, Charles returned to England, but remained restless. With the Gold Rush beckoning, he once again set out, most likely in 1849, this time to California. After a sea voyage of several months, he arrived in San Francisco, where he immediately

purchased a block of land on Kearney Street. He quickly moved on to Grass Valley, where he acquired his first hotel business.

From these facts it seems obvious that Charles Pittman brought sufficient funds with him. His entrepreneurial spirit recognized the opportunities the fast-growing area offered.

A few years later, most likely in late 1853 or early 1854, he once again returned to Bristol and stayed there for nearly a year. During this time, he courted and married Louisa May.

One letter, though undated, seems to reflect that courtship. Addressed to "My dearest Louisa," it was written from Southampton, where Charles seems to have stayed for a longer time period, likely to do with a business venture. Typical for letters of the time, all sentences run into each other, without using a single period in between.

"I have taken the opportunity of writing a few lines which I hope dear Louisa - you will except [sic] if you did but know what anxiety I feel to hear from you and am sure you would write a few lines which from receiving these, I think you will or at least I am sure you will ... I am always thinking of you ... there is not an hour in the day but what my mind is upon you ... O how happy I should be for that day to come when we should be together not to part again... I wrote to you before, I left London but do not know whether you had it or nor, I sent it in an Envelope [sic] to Miss Harrison, I shall be in London in a few weeks time for 2 or 3 days ... then I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you, I cannot make out for the life of me the reason I never heard from you ... it is nearly four months since I have heard from you or seen you but I hope it will not be four days more..."

They did get married, likely in late 1854. Charles must have convinced his young bride to venture out to California with him. The newlyweds set sail from Liverpool, first on the Clyde to New York City, where they stayed for six weeks, then on to the Isthmus of Panama, from where "they had an adventurous journey." They finished their journey on the steamer "Sierra Nevada" and landed in San Francisco. Two different sources date their arrival either as autumn 1854 or 1855.

The couple purchased a couple of hotels, "becoming proprietor of both the City and International hostelrys, in which business he [Charles Pittman] met with gratifying success. His next venture was in the same business at Cordelia, Solano county, whither he journeyed enroute to Sacramento, via Benicia and Cordelia. Unforeseen events occurred and he decided to remain at the latter place for a time."

My next column will continue with the story of the Pittman family in Cordelia and Suisun

Valley. I am thankful for the information Mr. William, Carrie Pittman's grandson, provided, and to Carol Wilcox, who painstakingly transcribed the letters to make them available for researchers.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/171>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/171/>