

Where is the 'real' Vacaville?

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, I stated that it was unknown which blocks of lots in the town of Vacaville were allotted to Vaca and Pena. Well, dagnabbit, that's not quite true. It's just that nobody seems to have written about it that I know of.

One thing I have learned over the past few years is that some authors just repeat what others have written without doing any in-depth research on the subject. If the first author gets it wrong, or leaves an important fact or two out, it will continue to be passed on in the future. That is how history can, unintentionally or even on purpose, become skewed with time.

I did a quick search of the original handwritten documents in the Solano County archives and found the deeds granting the lots to Vaca and Pena. For you folks that like details, they are located in the Solano Deeds Book "C" on pages 510 and 511.

On Oct. 1, 1850, Vaca was deeded even-numbered blocks of 10 lots each, from block 2 to 210, plus numbers 220 and 222 for a total of 105 saleable blocks. The deed was specific about each piece allotted to Vaca and included one block designated as a plaza and another that was reserved for a Catholic church and cemetery. There are 236 blocks listed on the plat map, so Vaca received a deed to almost half of the town.

Now things get a little fuzzy. In the deed to Pena it states as follows: "William McDaniel and L.B. Mizner, for and in consideration of one dollar, have this day (Oct. 18, 1850) bargained and sold unto Juan Phillip Pena, all our right, title and interest in and to two hundred (200) lots in the town of Vacaville, said lots to be selected by said McDaniel and Mizner out of any lots not otherwise disposed of."

At this point I do not know if he was sold 10 full blocks, an assortment of lots, or both.

The original town limits shown on the plat map of 1850, in today's surroundings, were as follows: Starting at the intersection of Elizabeth and Mason streets on a straight line north one mile would place the upper northwest corner of town at about the intersection of Vine Street and Alta Mira Drive. One mile east of this point places the northeast corner near the new bridge on the recent extension of Allison Drive from Browns Valley Parkway. The southeast corner would be at a few hundred yards west of the new Community Center.

The map included two plazas. One (block 145) would have been located near Callen Street a little north of East Monte Vista Avenue, and the other (Block 150), near the intersection of Brown Street and Hazel Street. Block 61, located near today's Travis Credit Union, was dedicated to public schools, and Block 66 was reserved for a Catholic church and cemetery near Interstate 80 and Callen Street. These locations are only approximations made by comparing the 1850 plat map with a recent map of Vacaville.

The original plat map was not drawn from an actual survey and was only a plan for the future, which never was carried out. Geography, old trails, later surveys and property owners determined how the town was actually to be laid out.

It wasn't until 1851 that Mount Diablo was chosen as the base point of United States Surveys in California. Up until that time, map and boundary locations were pretty vague. This, of course, made legal descriptions of properties pretty nebulous. In addition, the Vaca/Pena Los Putos land grant wasn't settled in the courts until June 1858.

People buying land under these conditions were taking a chance they would either lose their properties or the boundaries would not be where they thought they were. To further complicate the subject, Vaca died in May 1858, one month before the confirmation of the grant. The probate of his estate lasted late into the 20th century, and its story would fill a book.

By 1852, the McDaniel Tract of nine square miles of the Las Putos grant was divided as can be seen in the accompanying general map - redrawn from the original for clarity - with the town of Vacaville near the center. The original map was drawn in August 1852 on a thin sheet of paper that had been torn in half and crumpled. I believe it is on file with the city of Vacaville. Apparently it originates from a survey and may be one of the first general boundary maps around Vacaville with some degree of accuracy.

Sales, resales and additional divisions of properties came fast after 1852. In 1858 the Los Putos land grant finally was confirmed, and property owners probably breathed a sigh of relief.

The tangled web of deeds is recorded in official records, but much remains to be written about how it was done.

Further research of the early progress of Vacaville would make a good subject for local history students and would provide an interesting missing link in our local history.

Copies of the 1850 plat map of Vacaville and the original 1852 boundary map are on

file at the Vacaville Heritage Council, located in the old town hall on East Main Street. The Heritage Council is open on Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. or by appointment.

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