

Diaries chronicle a long road west

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Recently, a great-great-great-granddaughter of one of the early settlers in the Vacaville area, David Creighton, approached me with the news that she would like to share some of his diaries and letters with me.

I was delighted to have Kirsten Llamas lend me not only a transcript of a day-by-day diary, spanning the years 1865 to 1901, but also assorted letters and diaries from other family members and an oral history from David Creighton's eldest daughter, Eleanor Creighton Farmer. Their history helps answer a few local historical puzzles and sheds more light on the lives of the pioneer families.

David Creighton's father and mother arrived from Scotland and Wales, respectively, to settle on a farm nine miles outside Pittsburgh, Pa. They raised six sons - John, James, William, Alex, Sam Jr. and David. Once grown, the sons scattered throughout the continent, moving on to new frontiers in Iowa, Oregon, and Canada.

David Creighton married Jane Gray in Sharpsburg, Pa, on Dec. 28, 1838. Their first son, Samuel, was born sometime around 1841. The second child, a daughter they named Eleanor, was born Feb. 8, 1843, during a snowstorm in Alleghany City.

David Creighton worked as a carpenter and cabinetmaker. But like his other brothers, the new frontiers called and when baby Eleanor was barely six months old, the family set out westward.

Previously, David had gone to Davis County, Iowa, to secure land near the settlement of Blackhawk, close to the Des Moines River. He immediately began the construction of a hickory log cabin on his land before returning to Pennsylvania.

The family then set out on a flatboat down the Ohio, carrying David's precious toolbox and as many groceries as they could manage. A wagon and oxen brought them to the unfinished cabin. They had to sleep outdoors while David and a young neighbor hastily finished the cabin.

During the week, David worked in Blackhawk, constructing windows and doors, building a log schoolhouse and a mill. Eventually, he contracted malaria, a malady that would haunt him with attacks the rest of his life.

One night, Eleanor remembered, there was a lot of commotion in the area where her parents slept, with people coming and going. The next morning, the family had grown by another daughter, Isabell Jones.

Jane Gray Creighton's older sister, Sarah, her husband William Davison and their children - eventually they would have seven surviving ones - had settled nearby. David built a log schoolhouse on William's land.

Eleanor recalls that her brother Samuel, and later herself, both would walk the two miles from their farm through the woods to attend school. On one occasion, her father picked her up after school and carried her home. It was raining and Eleanor's new apron, dyed indigo-blue, streaked color all over her face and hands.

Around 1847, the family added a second house, also built from logs, but with two stories, a brick fireplace and a shingled roof. The family had grown by another daughter, Sarah-Jane or Sade, as she was called.

David grew wheat and threshed it by beating it with flails. One harvest became especially memorable to Eleanor:

"While harvesting was going on, my brother, Samuel, went over to the field around the cabin to see the men work," she recalled. "As he jumped down from the fence, a rattlesnake struck him on the great toe. Mr. Rowe, a neighbor who helped with the harvest, picked him up in his arms, and being an old frontiersman, knew what to do: He ran down to the little stream that ran nearby, washed and squeezed it to make it bleed, then took tobacco from his pocket and bound it on (the toe). My father came along on horseback from town, took him (Samuel) over home, and went for a doctor. Meanwhile Mr. Rowe went to the nearby prairie, got button snakeroot and steeped it to give him with whiskey to counteract one poison with another. His leg swelled up to his body and turned spotted but his life was saved by the prompt action."

With the discovery of gold in California, David saw a new opportunity. In the spring or early summer of 1850, he loaded up a wagon with food supplies and set out. Eleanor recalled how she, her mother and her siblings hitched their two horses to the farm wagon and accompanied their father to the wagon meeting place to see him off. At the time, she wondered why her mother kept herself wrapped in her shawl - the mystery was solved in July with the arrival of another daughter, Martha Elizabeth, or Matt for short.

It was a difficult year for Jane and her children. The neighbors helped somewhat, as was usual along the frontier, but much rested on Jane's shoulders. Food supplies grew short. At one time, Jane resorted to parching corn, grinding it in her coffee mill and

cooking mush and milk - standard frontier fare.

Jane suffered much from bad teeth. Without a dentist to help her, she tried to dull the pain by taking laudanum (tincture of opium), a widely used pain remedy. One night she feared that she had taken too much, becoming extremely drowsy. She resorted to brewing strong coffee and drinking it to counteract the effects of her possible overdose.

Meanwhile, David worked in the Mariposa mines in California. None of his letters ever reached the family. Finally, 13 months later, he returned to them in 1852 after a long sea voyage to New York, and from there by stage and riverboat to Iowa.

In 1853, the family moved to Troy, Iowa, where David bought a sawmill, a grist mill and a mill to card wool.

But California kept on calling him. In 1862, David set out once more, travelling again through Pittsburgh, where he would see his mother for the last time, then to New York, and by boat to San Francisco and from there to Vacaville.

Josiah Allison, an old friend of David's from Iowa, had settled here a few years earlier. He was instrumental in bringing David to Vacaville

David quickly became known as a carpenter and cabinetmaker, but he also bought land next to that owned by Josiah Allison, and began planting an orchard at night. After a long journey overland, the family joined him the following year.

David's diaries have been preserved from 1865 until his death. Each day, he entered laconic, one-sentence descriptions of all he had done or of events that had happened to him and to family members. Despite their brevity, a colorful picture emerges of David himself and life on the Creighton farm according to the rhythm of the agricultural year.

In January 1865, for example, he recorded that he worked for the Pacific Methodist College (then located in today's Andrews Park), hanging doors and transoms, and putting down carpet strips. At home, he planted onions, hauled loads of wheat, dug garden beds, and pruned grapevines. He also added a shed with two bedrooms to the east side of his house.

This house had an earlier owner - Josiah Allison, who had his new house built by David Creighton in 1864/65. The original Allison house, built after their arrival in 1854, was a simple sod house. According to Helen Power, Josiah Allison's granddaughter, the house was moved onto the Creighton property after the new Allison home was completed. One can only wonder what Jane thought of this little sod house after her nice houses back in Iowa. Over the next few years, David would add rooms and

additions whenever and wherever he thought it necessary.

I'll continue my story of David and Jane Creighton's life in early Vacaville in my next column. I would like to thank Kirsten Llamas of Florida for her permission to use the diaries and other documents.

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