

Vaca settlers help raise a college

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This continues the story of David and Jane Gray Creighton after they settled in Vacaville in 1863. The story is based on the diaries of David Creighton, transcribed by his great-granddaughter, Josephine Farmer Albrecht. Her daughter, Kirsten Llamas of Florida, granted permission to use diaries, letters and photographs - Editor.

David Creighton had purchased his Vacaville property from a close friend, Josiah Allison, whom he either already knew in Iowa or had met somewhere during the Gold Rush.

Josiah had settled in the Vacaville area around 1852, while David arrived 10 years later.

Besides farming the 13 acres he purchased from Josiah Allison, he also supported his family through his profession as a cabinetmaker and carpenter.

In 1865, he built a new house for the Allison family, close to where today's Harbison house stands. The old Allison house then was moved to the Creighton property. During the next few years, David's diaries record numerous repairs, additions and refurbishments on this house, reflecting the needs of his growing family.

Most of his diary entries deal with the daily life of running his farm and the carpentry work he was commissioned to do. Occasionally, though, his life was touched by larger events.

One of these occurred on April 15, 1865. Typical of that time, his spelling often was phonetic or just plain creative. "Pressident Lincoln Assinated last night," he noted. President Lincoln was indeed assassinated on April 14. It just seems astonishing that this important piece of news had reached Vacaville by the following day and had already been distributed to the outlying farms.

During the preceding year, tensions had run high between supporters of the South, nicknamed the Copperheads, and those supporting the North. A majority of the Vacaville population at the time supported the South. Nonetheless, the assassination shocked the community deeply.

On April 19, David Creighton reported that he "Went to a funeral service in honour of

the President at Collage.”

By “Collage,” he referred to the Pacific Methodist College, located on the south side of the Ulatis Creek.

The Pacific Methodist College had been established in 1860 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which purchased buildings of the by-then-defunct Ulatis Academy. The college opened to its students in 1861.

Hester Allison Harbison, daughter of Josiah Allison, later remembered, “Two reasons for choosing this town were its location, and the fact that a number of citizens in town and country, among them Josiah Allison, were able and willing to subscribe liberally to a fund for the establishment and maintenance of a college, in order that their children might have the advantages of a higher education.”

At that time there was no state university, and, I think, no college in Northern California. Students came to this college from all parts of Northern California, at least as far north as Tehema (sic) County, from cities and from farms ...”

David Creighton seems to have been one of the trustees. There are indications in his diary that he served as the treasurer for the college at this time.

Despite the shock about President Lincoln’s assassination, tension between the Copperheads and those supporting the North continued. Many of the students at the college were Copperheads. On April 21, the Weekly Solano Herald set its columns in black, condemning Copperheads and secessionists.

But a new shock awaited the community. David recorded on April 28, 1865: “The Collage burnt down this Morning between 2 and 4 Oclock. Fixed seats in boarding house for School.”

The Weekly Solano Herald gave a more elaborate report on May 5, 1865:

“INCENDIARISM. - At about 3 o’clock last Friday morning (April 28), a fire was discovered in the roof of the wooden portion of the College at Vacaville, which entirely destroyed that building and greatly endangered the boarding-house nearby. By dint of great extortion, however, and the application of wet blankets, that portion of the property was saved. As there had been no fire in the building for two weeks past, and as no part of it was occupied at night, the conclusion is irresistible that the fire was the work of some dastardly wretch who sought thus to vent his spite against those having

charge of the institution, whether prompted by personal feeling or partisan animosity; though we are slow to believe that anyone who has shared the grief which has so recently overwhelmed the nation, caused by democratic lawlessness, would resort to kindred measures to express his disapproval of the stand taken by the President and Faculty of the College.”

While the culprit was never found, it was always believed that the College was burned because it belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and thus to the opponents of Lincoln’s policy.

Despite the fire, life continued normally. At the Creighton family, this included the wedding of their third daughter, Isabell, or Bell for short. On May 4, David wrote: “Attended to affairs at home. Bell was married this morning at half past ten Oclock to Mr. Henry Eversol, they started for Sacramento at noon. Went to Collage Exebetion and to heare the graduating Class. Samuel graduated today.”

Despite the fire, the school continued to function, scrambling for shelter, furniture, and other support materials, and managing to graduate that year’s class, which included David and Jane Creighton’s oldest child and only son, 24-year-old Samuel. He went on to teach at a school in Green Valley.

The College Exhibitions provided some educational entertainment each Friday afternoon. David Creighton seems to have been one of its frequent attendants, as his repeated diary entries proved.

We have a lively description of these exhibitions by Willis Jepson, who wrote in the diaries of his childhood days: “The real entertainment of those days were the Friday afternoon “speakings” at the district school, or the Friday evening exhibitions at the college. It was at the college exhibitions that Ceph Bateman acquired a real fame in our town.

“Most every child in school was called up to speak a piece. If you could do a little better than the ordinary run, your effort became a recitation, even though your legs shook beneath you in a frenzy of stage fright. If, however, you had sufficient self-control to use your arms a bit in emphasis of what was given out by your tongue, then your piece became a declamation.

“For rare spirits on the school stage there was reserved the real heights of glory, an ovation, where graceful and forceful gestures clinched the awful periods as they rolled mightily forth. For Ceph Bateman was reserved the ovation. He was equal to it.”

After the fire, Mason Wilson, Josiah Allison and W. J. Dobbins rallied the community to

raise funds for a new building on the north side of Ulatis Creek (today Andrews Park).

David Creighton likely was among these supporters. In addition, during the next few months, his diaries recorded the efforts to create a new, functioning school location as quickly as possible.

On June 3, he wrote: "Began working for Pres. Luckey of the College making writing Desks and temporary quarters at the Boarding house."

During the following weeks, he "put up platform and layed foundations of Dining room, layed floor and got out stair stuff, put up stairs, layed platform floor and raised the Building. Put up siding and sheeted building, worked on dining room hung a door, shingled main building. Put in a door in Kitchen and one in main building." He also "moved music room, put in a window, put seats on Resterum, shelved window, and put down Bace" at the College.

The community effort to re-establish the college seemed successful. On Oct. 16, he was able to record "Went to laying of Cornerstone of the new Collage."

Work continued throughout the next year, On June 2, 1866, he staked off the foundation for a college building." The following months, he continued to work on the building and by Sept. 24 was able to write: "Put up scaffolds and raised the College roof timbers, put them on, laid roofing."

On Nov. 3, 1866, he added: "Nineteen more days for College on windows, doors and cupola," all of which were made entirely by hand; glass was set in with strips.

Records indicate that the college paid David \$500 for his work between Aug. 1 and Dec. 31, 1866, an indication of the high level of craftsmanship he provided.

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