Vaca settler’s diary reveals busy days

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This continues the story of David and Jane Gray Creighton, based on the diaries of David Creighton, transcribed by his great-granddaughter Josephine Farmer Albrecht. - Editor

In my last column, we left David Creighton in early 1866, settled on his farm in the Vacaville area while plying his carpentry handiwork in the rebuilding of the Pacific Methodist College. He continued to work for the college for the next few years.

Subsequent diary entries show that he not only worked as a carpenter and builder, but actually designed house plans for various people around town. Projects included anything from outhouses to complete new residences.

Many days, he worked on various aspects of people’s houses, as in June of 1866 for Mr. Davis. Creighton spent two days “making header beads” (Victorian trim). Another client, the Butcher family, lost their house to a fire, and Creighton designed and built their new home.

In 1866, he added a Victorian porch to the Butcher home, complete with columns that took him 10 days to create and a frieze decoration that took another three days. The whole porch was two stories high. Creighton completed the project in 45 days.

In between all the work, he often notes “Not well” on a day, usually implying that he suffered another attack of malaria. The intense farm labor accounted for other missed workdays, such as in late summer of 1866, when he mowed wheat for six days in a row, after which his arms were so sore from the scythe work that he had to rest a day. Not given to idleness, he worked on his pump and found a dead mouse in it.

Creighton also took his civic duties very seriously, often serving as a juror on various trials conducted at the courthouse in Fairfield. On Dec. 4 1866, he noted: “Come to Fairfield this morning to serve as a Juror impaneled (sic) on a case of burning hay. Boarded with Dr. McMahon (the McMahons were old friends from Iowa).”

The trial continued on the next day. “Finished the Hay burning case this evening, verdict for Plaintiff.” Like many jurors then and now, waiting to be selected was part of serving. “Sat in the Courthouse all Day. Was not taken on anny (sic) Case.”

Cases mostly concerned property, sales or theft of animals and other farm commodities. "Was taken on a suit about a Hog. Did not agree. The Judge dismist (sic) us at 8 o'clock p.m." was one of his next entries, followed by "On a trial of a Man for stealing a Horse, brought in a verdict of guilty. Come home with Samuel (his son) in Buggy. Got home at dark."

Creighton loved roses and continued to add new bushes to his property every year. He always noted their pruning early in the year. "Pruned and trained my rose bushes. Planted rose slips for Arbor," he wrote on Jan. 22, 1867. Eventually, his house was called "Rose Arbor."

Each year, Creighton also added large numbers of grape slips to his vineyard. At the time, both wine and table grapes were a profitable part of a farm organization. Table grapes were harvested, packed in sawdust and shipped to San Francisco, where they brought good prices.

M. R. Miller was the first to try to ship his grapes to the East Coast. In 1863 or 1864, he packed his harvest in cork dust and shipped the grapes from Suisun to San Francisco, and from there by ship via Panama to New York. The venture failed, though, as the delicate grapes spoiled on the long journey. The arrival of the Pacific Railroad in 1869 eventually opened the East Coast markets to Solano County growers.

One of the earliest vineyards planted in the area belonged to Creighton's friend and neighbor, Josiah Allison. He acquired

$40 worth of grape stock from a nursery in Napa County around 1854, which were, as his daughter Hester recalled, twigs to provide buds for grafting purposes. A decade later, the Solano Press wrote on Sept. 5, 1866:

"Last Sunday we had the pleasure of visiting the extensive orchard and vineyard of Mr. Josiah Allison, a few miles east of Vacaville.

Mr. Allison has probably the largest vineyard in the county - one of forty acres, containing 30,000 vines, and a young vineyard of fifty acres which promises well for the future. The cool and well arranged cellar and the excellent wine contained in it are both well worthy of inspection. The wine has a pleasant, champagne-like taste, peculiar to it alone, which some professed connoisseurs have attributed to excellent flavoring, but Mr. Allison disclaims all 'doctoring' practices in his winemaking, the liquor being the pure juice of the grape. Its sweet and fascinating flavor is owing to the fact that he allows his grapes to thoroughly ripen, before stripping the vines, and besides, the Vacaville climate has many advantages over that of Sonoma and Los Angeles. Mr. Allison will make this year from 8,000 to 10,000 gallons of wine, and can find a ready

market for all of it.”

Though extensive records of Allison’s farming methods exist, the grape variety grown for this intriguing-sounding wine remains unknown.

About a week before the Solano Republican visited Allison’s vineyards, Creighton noted that he fixed Josiah Allison’s wine press, probably to get it ready for the coming harvest.

Work on a farm was not only hard, but also sometimes resulted in accidents. Some of these found their way into the diary. The terse one-liners give only a hint at the true event. Such is the case on Feb. 11 1867, where David Creighton noted: “Gathered brush in Orchard all Day. My Wife had her Finger cut off about five o’clock this Evening. Clear.”

We never learn which finger, how she cut it off, or what they did to take care of this calamity medically.

From Aug. 9, 1867, until March 23, 1867, David Udell, son of another early settler family, moved in to board with them and help Creighton with the farm work.

Creighton’s work alternated between the farm and his carpentry and building shops, often leading to 14-hour workdays. He and Jane diligently observed the Sunday, attending church meetings or staying at home, often writing letters to friends and family members.

While the family did not celebrate Christmas elaborately, they participated in other holiday celebrations. Creighton mentioned that each year he and Jane attended a May Day picnic. Large May Day celebrations took place throughout the area.

These were popular events where friends and neighbors could gather for an afternoon of fun after the long winter months and busy spring planting season. Local botanist Willis Jepson recorded his memories of a May Day picnic in 1875:

“What a festive scene. Everyone scattered over the clean glade, little groups here and there making ready to enjoy the day, the fresh colors of the girls dresses, the boys in their best clothes, not to speak of the bunting on the candy and lemonade stands. Everyone was talking and visiting and renewing old acquaintances. Promptly at twelve o’clock everyone prepared for lunch - the white cloths spread on the grass and heaped high with the best things to eat - roast chicken, fried chicken, pies and cakes of all kind and crackly biscuits, doughnuts and short bread.”

Another favorite relaxation were the visits to the Creighton's daughter Eleanor "Nellie," who had married William Coburn Farmer. The couple owned several properties in Vallejo and later in Elmira.

With the arrival of the railroad, travel had become much easier, but visits still typically lasted several days. On Jan. 25, 1869, Creighton "Started on a visit to Coburn and Nellie. Got to Mr. Farmer's (Coburn's father) at ten o'clock. Got to Coburn's at 5 p.m (at this time Coburn and Nellie lived on the Farmer Ranch, near American Canyon)."

Creighton stayed for a couple of days, went to Vallejo with his son-in-law, Coburn, and finally set out for Vacaville on Jan. 29. "Coburn brought us to the Station in his buggy. Took the cars at 10 minutes past six. Got to Vaca Station (later Elmira) at 9. Got home half past ten."

I'll continue my story of David and Jane Creighton's life in early Vacaville in my next column. I'd like to thank her daughter, Kirsten Llamas of Florida, for permission to use diaries, letters and photographs for these columns.

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