

Trains speed Elmira to S.F. trip in 1868

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This column continues the story of David and Jane Gray Creighton during the 1870s. It is based on the diaries of David Creighton, transcribed by his great-granddaughter Josephine Farmer Albrecht. I'd like to thank her daughter, Kirsten Llamas of Florida, for permission to use diaries, letters and photographs for these columns. Editor.

My last columns have explored the background to some of the diary entries David Creighton made throughout his life in Solano County. Often a short entry, such as the one made sometime in July of 1868, offers a clue to an interesting story. Unfortunately, Josephine Farmer Albrecht's transcription of the diaries summarized many entries without giving precise dates. In this case, the transcript said: "Instead of going to Meeting (at the Pacific College on Sundays), he 'went to the Railroad Station to the excursion from Vallejo.'"

On or around Saturday, July 18, 1868, the long-awaited tracks of the California Pacific Railroad finally reached Vaca Station (Elmira). This was a momentous occasion for the residents of Vacaville and surrounding area, opening up a new and fast transportation method for their grain harvests to reach the shipping port of Vallejo.

Due to its deep-water port, Vallejo had emerged as one of the main shipping venues along the coast for the grain growers. Before the arrival of the California Pacific Railroad, thousands of tons of grain grown in Solano County were taken by wagonload to Suisun and put on boats to Vallejo and San Francisco.

Obviously, this event of an "excursion from Vallejo" was important enough for a wheat farmer like David Creighton to skip a Sunday lecture. At a guess, other regulars at the lectures likely missed this particular one, too. David Creighton's entry implied that a train, likely the first train, with a party from Vallejo, arrived at Vaca Station to be welcomed by local residents.

Fairfield-Suisun had opened its station to freight and passenger services on June 29, 1868. The train ride west included a connection by boat to San Francisco. The California Pacific Railroad let farmers in the county know that the trains were able to carry 500 tons of grain and assorted other freights per day.

Travel to the city now could be accomplished in less than four hours. According to one schedule, the train left Sacramento at 7:15 a.m., arriving in San Francisco at 11:30 a.m.

The afternoon return trip left San Francisco at 4 p.m. on the Steamer New World, connected to the California Pacific Railroad in Vallejo and arrived in Sacramento at 8:20 p.m. This allowed travelers to spend more than four hours in San Francisco and still return the same day.

The trains also made family visits easier. On May 13, the Creighton's son "Matt was married at 6 o'clock." Son-in-law William Coburn Farmer and his wife Eleanor, who owned a farm in the American Canyon area, came by train to attend the wedding. David Creighton took both to Vaca Station on the following day.

Train fares to San Francisco ran to \$4, at a time when a farm laborer earned less than \$1 per day.

David Creighton on occasion also used this convenient new form of travel for himself. On Sept. 10, 1869, he "Went with Coburn to Vallejo, afternoon. 11. Went to San Francisco this morning on board the Steamer Antelope. Returned this evening on same boat. 12. Got home today at 2." With the Coburns living in the American Canyon area, it was convenient for him to spend a night with them rather than make the trip in one day.

That same late summer, David Creighton recorded shipments of dried fruits and almonds. He dried Muscat grapes for raisins. Fruit boxes also went out to Nellie and Coburn Farmer, whose ranch likely did not have much of an orchard.

Having trains reach Vaca Station also made the transport of goods to Vacaville easier. During the quiet winter months in early January 1870, when less work was needed outside, David Creighton began repair work on his wagon. He picked up lumber at Vaca Station to make a wagon bed.

Over the next three months, his diaries record that he "mortised rails for the wagon bed and went to the blacksmith shop for his wagon. Went to town to get a brake put on the wagon, finished the wagon bed, painted it, made a front seat, washed the running gear and painted that." While he was painting, he did the kitchen chairs, two doors, a cupboard, and a flour box. "Made a bee box too."

Finally, in July and August he put up a frame for his "wagon shade [sic]," and finished the shed.

He got it all finished just in time. Once the peach harvest started that year, he worked 41 days straight, except Sundays. He picked and cut the peaches to dry them. The peaches were dried on the barn roof. They were gathered, sacked and shipped. He also pared peaches for canning.

According to his accounts for that year, during one month he shipped 1,095 pounds of fruit to San Francisco. In addition, he sold \$ 27.75 worth straight from the orchard, with peaches costing 50 cents a bucket.

Obviously, he was not able to do all this work by himself, but mentioned hiring and firing workers throughout the years. In 1874, he lists a new source of help in his vineyards: Chinese workers. (Unfortunately, the diaries for 1872 and 1873 are missing.)

Once work on the railroads had ended, Chinese workers sought employment as houseboys or in the newly flourishing orchard industry. Many of them were young men who came from small villages in Canton. They often brought extensive knowledge of fruit cultivation to their new jobs. The 1870 census figures showed a total of 441 Chinese in Solano County, many of them working as farm laborers in Suisun Valley and Vaca Valley.

In Creighton's creative way of spelling, "China" turned into "Chiney" and so they became "Chineymen" in his entries. For years, they were a constant source of help; in his later years, they even ran his orchards.

During the early 1870s, another project kept David Creighton well-occupied. He was experimenting with a new gate model, which he hoped to patent. In March and April of 1871, he worked six days on the model, before taking it to patent agents in San Francisco.

Work on the model continued throughout the summer, despite all his other chores. Sometime in September he finally "Finished and varnished the gate model and made another box for it. Took the gate model to S.F." A note in the back of this diary reads: "Patent granted for self-opening gate by the Carriage wheel July 7th (probably 1872)."

He continued to work on the gate model, such as in May of 1874, when he spent about 20 days on his "new gate," which included drawing a pattern, and even going into Vacaville to the blacksmith shop twice in one day.

Well-known botanist Willis Linn Jepson, son of early pioneers, who was born in 1867 on the family's Little Oak Ranch (situated east of today's Peabody Road and south of Alamo Road) recollected Vacaville in the early 1870's, before the economic heyday of the fruit industry, giving us a vivid impression of the small, but growing town.

"The village was a quiet place - a truly country village. Sounds there were the most distinctive the clang of the anvil in the blacksmith shops. The most distinctive, the most picturesque was Cernon's, Hugh Cernon, the smith, a huge place, tremendous, cavernous, with great recesses and nooks, and a wagon shop on one side where

wagons were built ...

“A characteristic feature was the hitching rack. Here farmers tied their teams for the time they did business in the village. The earth became excavated near the posts; the stamping of the shod feet cut the earth into fine dust blown away by the wind under the years. Men also came into the village to loaf and drink at the saloons, leaving their patient horses without food or water tied to the hitching rack until far into the night - their owners gambling and drinking ...”

As a teetotaler, David Creighton likely did not approve of the latter.

I'll continue my story of David and Jane Creighton's life in early Vacaville in my next column.

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