

Gold Rush lured family to California

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Luzena Stanley Wilson and her husband, Mason Wilson, are two names that resonate through Vacaville's early history. The couple arrived in California with their two toddlers in 1849, attracted by the Gold Rush. They experienced the hardships of the rough society of Sacramento and Nevada City before finally settling in the fertile Vaca Valley in 1851.

The presence of women was rare in the early years of the Gold Rush. Luzena Stanley Wilson published her memories of that experience in 1881, in a series of articles in *The Argonaut* of San Francisco under the title "A Woman's Reminiscences of Early Days."

In 1937, Eucalyptus Press of Mills College published Luzena's recollections under the title "49er: Memories Recalled Years Later For Her Daughter, Correnah Wilson Wright." Through this publication, long since out of print, Luzena's voice has become one of the few important historical sources illustrating the Gold Rush from a woman's perspective.

Yet while her memoir has always been a delight to read, showing her as a strong and resourceful pioneer woman, it was written from memory, decades after events happened. It also was a personal recollection that omitted many facts known to her own family and not thought important to record.

Thus, not much was known until recently about Luzena or the Wilson family beyond the time frame recorded in the memoirs.

During the last few years, however, local historian Fern Henry undertook the task of examining Luzena's story and her family background. Her research is published in her new book "My checkered Life: Luzena Stanley Wilson in Early California." In it, Henry tells the story of Luzena's family from birth to death and checks her stories against those of other Gold Rush participants and other historic resources.

As a result of her painstaking research, fascinating new information on Luzena and her family has emerged, including photographs of both Luzena and her children Thomas, Jay, and Correnah.

Luzena Stanley Hunt was born as the third child of Asa and Diana Hunt on May 1,

1819. Her parents were members of the Quaker community New Garden Monthly Meeting in North Carolina.

Both parents also had been born in New Garden Monthly Meeting - Asa on Nov. 4, 1790, and Diana Stanley on May 24, 1796. Their ancestors originally had come from England; Luzena's great-grandmother Elizabeth Walker Stanley was a descendant of the Scottish Stewart kings.

Quaker communities were based on equality and freedom, but also on adherence to a strict set of rules. At the center of their society was the meetinghouse, where the weekly meetings on First Day/Sunday took place. Worship was conducted mostly in silence, with the worshipper concentrating on his "Inner Light."

Quakers followed a high standard of behavior. As pacifists, they eschewed fighting in a war and were opposed to slavery. They also were moderate in their use of alcohol, the way they dressed and behaved. Any Quaker who broke one of the numerous rules received a counseling visit from other members. If a member did not conform, he or she could be expelled from the community.

Asa and Diana Stanley are mentioned in the community minutes as early as Nov. 27, 1813, their wedding date. "A committee was appointed to meet with Asa Hunt regarding his marriage contrary to discipline," the notes read. A later entry on the same day added: "The committee reported no satisfaction and disowned Asa Hunt."

Traditionally, a couple wanting to marry, first informed the men and women's meetings of their intention. The committees would then investigate whether both partners were free to marry, a process that could take several months. Only then was the couple allowed to exchange simple vows in front of the congregation.

It seems that Asa and Diana circumvented this process and got married without the congregation's consent, though it remains unclear where they married and who witnessed the ceremony.

Another complaint concerning the marriage appeared in January 1814, this time only against Diana. The women's committee met with her and resolved the issue, as the notes on Feb. 26, 1814 recorded: "The friends appointed last meeting to visit with Diana Hunt report they have attended thereto with a degree of satisfaction and she appeared at the meeting and offered a paper condemning her outgoings in marriage which was acceptable."

Asa took longer to reconcile, but was accepted back into the community in January 1815. By that time, the Hunt family had welcomed their first daughter, Rebecca, born

Dec. 12, 1814. Her short life ended on March 16, 1816.

A second daughter, Lydia, was born Feb. 21, 1817, followed by Luzena in 1819. Over the next 13 years, six more children joined the family: Martha in 1821; Alvis, date unknown but possibly in 1823; Eliza in 1825; William Gaston in 1827; Emily in 1830; and Harriet around 1832.

William Gaston Hunt published a family history of his own which was passed down through his descendants. In it he described his parents and their early life. He also quoted the couple as having eight daughters, though existing records only mention seven.

"The family represented by William Gaston Hunt was of southern blood," he wrote, "and his father, Asa Hunt, the descendant of English ancestry. His mother, formerly Diana Stanley, was of Quaker birth, in which she reared her large family of eight daughters and two sons, of whom William Gaston Hunt was the youngest, his birth occurring in Guilford County, North Carolina, February 12, 1827. The means of the family was rather limited and no large income derived from the father's work in the milling business (both lumber and woolen mills) and the conduct of a cotton gin, and through the early death of his parents, the mother in 1846 and the father two years later, William G. Hunt found the greater part of his sister's support upon his shoulders."

William Gaston Hunt left the impression that his father may not have been reared in the Quaker faith, which might be the explanation for the trouble surrounding their marriage. Did he possibly join to be able to marry Diana? That might also explain the second admonition against Diana in February 1814.

Asa also was admonished in 1830 for "having spirituous liquors distilled and taking an oath in Court as a juror." This seems to refer to the "cotton gin" in William's account. With the Quaker mistrust of alcohol, running a cotton gin certainly went against community standards.

The final dissent of the family with Quaker standards was recorded in the Women's minutes of January 1836. "The preparative meeting complains of Diana Hunt and her Daughters Lydia and Luzena for not attending meeting and deviating from plainness." The notes do not elaborate what the digression was, a colored ribbon maybe, bright colors or another piece of adornment?

On Feb. 27, 1836, the next entry noted: "The friends appointed last month with Diana Hunt and her Daughters Lydia and Luzena report they have had opportunity with Diana and Luzena but they did not appear to be in a disposition to make satisfaction and

informed them that Lydia was of the same mind. Therefore, this meeting thinks it best to disown them from being members thereof." Lydia was seventeen, Luzena sixteen years old. The family did not seek reinstatement.

Working a sawmill was hard labor indeed, especially in a society that shunned slave labor, but had to compete with businesses that operated with slaves. With hired employees, Quakers had much higher overhead cost and less profit. The census of 1840 shows two male "free coloreds" as part of the Hunt family.

By 1843, the Hunt family had moved from North Carolina to Andrew County in Missouri, where they purchased 160 acres of government owned land. Here Luzena met Mason Wilson, whom she married on December 19, 1844. She was twenty-five years old.

Much less is known of Mason Wilson's life. His probable birth date is Oct. 3, 1806, the son of Joseph Thornton Wilson and Elizabeth Grace Fyffe, of Mason County, Kentucky. His years until he married Luzena remain undocumented.

I will continue Luzena's story in my next column and would like to thank Fern Henry for permission to excerpt from her publication and her loan of photographs.

Fern Henry, "My Checkered Life: Luzenia Stanley Wilson in Early California. Her Overland Journey plus Pioneer Life in Vacaville, Sacramento & Nevada City," Carl Mautz Publishing, 2003, can now be found in the Vacaville Museum Gift Store or can be ordered through any book dealer.

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