

## Traces of some early homes still survive

**By Jerry Bowen**

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Have you ever wondered where some of the earliest settlers lived in Solano County? Perhaps your own home is located right on top of, or near, the site one of our historical figures once called home and you don't even know it.

Believe it or not, there are several structures scattered around our county that were built in the 1840s through the 1850s that survive in one form or another. Others have completely disappeared and the exact locations are debatable.

Probably the one that is best-known is the old Pena adobe home, built in 1842, in Lagoon Valley. The adobe structure is about 42 x 18 feet, one and a half stories with an outside stairway on the south end; the walls are about 24 inches thick, made of adobe bricks of 22 x 11 x 3 inches.

The adobe and rancho became a way station for land travel between the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento area. During the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846, Gen. Mariano Vallejo and his captors spent the night there on the way to Sutter's Fort. Today it survives for two reasons. First, it once had a wooden shell built over the adobe structure when descendants of Juan Pena lived in it. Secondly, members of the Solano Historical Society, Cliff Hangers, Boy Scouts and many other organizations restored the adobe structure in the 1960s and did follow-up work in the early 1970s before it fell into complete ruin.

When the Vacas and Penas arrived is, even today, in dispute. Bancroft, a historian from the 1880s, gives 1841 as the date of their arrival in Vaca Valley and Edward Wickson, also a historian from the 1880s, gives the date as Aug. 15 of that year. John R. Wolfskill testified that in 1842 Pena arrived with his wife and six children and Vaca with his wife and seven children.

Less well-known is where their very first humble dwelling, known as the "wattle house" was located. Turn-of-the-century local historian Crystal described the wattle house as built "of brush and twigs on an elevated spot overlooking the valley." It was located near Ulati creek in today's Andrews Park in Vacaville. It was only a temporary structure until the Vaca and Pena adobes were built in Lagoon Valley.

Juan Manual Vaca for whom Vacaville is named, built his adobe in 1842 about 100 feet from today's Cherry Glen Road and about one-third of a mile northeast of the Pena

adobe and about 50 feet north of a tributary of the old Laguna Creek. It was a long low building about 64 x 24 feet with four rooms. The walls were made of adobe brick 24 x 11 x 3 inches.

The house was virtually destroyed by the earthquake of 1892 and not long after was razed because of its unsafe condition. Later, a Mr. S. L. Lopez built a home on or very near the site, but nothing remains of it either.

Several descendants and family members of Juan Manuel Vaca built their homes in a cluster near Davis along the South Fork of Putah Creek southwest of what is now the junction of I-80 and Highway 113.

The Jose Vaca Adobe home was built about 1850 approximately 1500 feet due south of the junction of the South Fork of Putah Creek with Putah Creek. Jose was a brother of Manuel Vaca. The home stood in an open field near the end of Vineyard Lane about a mile west of what is now the I-80 and Highway 113 junction. The house was in ruins by 1870 and nothing exists today.

The Francisco Pena wood frame house was built in the early 1850s about 600 feet west and about 200 feet south of the junction of the South Fork of Putah Creek and the main Putah Creek. The house later adjoined the north end of the home of F. W. Palmer. It was one story, about 20 x 15 feet.

The Miguel Vaca adobe built in the 1850s, stood 330 feet from the south bank of Putah Creek and probably on or near today's Brooks Road.

The Jesus-Teofilo Vaca frame dwelling, built in the early 1850s was about 300 feet west of Miguel Vaca's adobe and was a wood frame dwelling.

The Marcos Vaca adobe, built in the early 1850s near the south bank of Putah Creek about four-tenths of a mile west of today's I-80 and Highway 113 junction, probably was near today's Brooks Road.

The Gavino Pena frame dwelling stood between and near the junction of the South Fork of Putah Creek and the south bank of Putah Creek about .35 of a mile northeast of the junction. The only knowledge of its existence was the recollection of Mrs. Gavino Pena whose husband built it sometime after their marriage; the exact date is not known. The fate of the house is also unknown.

At the north end of Solano County were the homes of one of the earliest arrivals in the area. William Wolfskill came to California in 1830, via New Mexico. He was a hunter and in Los Angeles was a carpenter. In 1841, he married a daughter of Jose I. Lugo

and the next year received the Putah Creek grant that encompasses portions of both Solano and Yolo counties. In 1844 he was a member of the Los Angeles pueblo council. In 1866 he died at the age of 68. The locations of the first homes built by the Wolfskill brothers are only generally known and debatable as to their actual sites.

John Wolfskill, an older brother of William, came to California in 1838 through New Mexico; in July 1842 he occupied the rancho for his brother and remained on it the remainder of his life

The location of John Wolfskill's first dwelling, a wattle house dating to about 1842, is unknown, but no doubt it was near the site of his later adobe. The site is believed to be one-tenth of a mile north of Putah Creek Road and 2.6 miles west of today's Putah Creek Bridge at Winters. On the Diseno of 1842 no house is shown. Several witnesses in the land case testified that John Wolfskill built a small house, presumably a temporary shelter, within a few days of his arrival on the grant and that it was a wattle or a palizada. No direct evidence of its building material has been found.

John Wolfskill, in his testimony in the land case in 1854, evidently did not consider it worth mentioning for he spoke only of the house built in September 1842. Manuel Vaca testified in the same year that the first house had disappeared and had been replaced by a new one.

John Wolfskill's second home, an adobe, probably also stood on the south bank of Putah Creek, about a tenth of a mile north of today's Putah Creek Road at a point 2.6 miles west of the Putah Creek bridge at Winters.

John Wolfskill's third home was built of logs sometime in the 1840s in the same general area as the second and stood until about the 1860s or 1870s.

In my next column I'll continue with more locations of dwellings occupied by our earliest settlers throughout the county.

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