

## **Early homes were made of adobe**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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In my last column I wrote, "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."

I have received some e-mails that asked the question, "What is a palizada?"

A "palizada" usually was built of logs placed upright into the ground to form the walls of a temporary home or shelter; sort of like a mini-fort. The roof was thatched with tules or reeds that grew in abundance around the creeks in the area. It normally didn't have any windows and the door to the structure was usually a leather flap. On some of the palizadas, the builder would sometimes seal the cracks in the logs with adobe mud.

The wattle houses and palizadas were normally only temporary structures to satisfy one of the requirements to obtain a land grant as well as temporary living quarters. After a land grant was issued, the more familiar, permanent, adobe dwelling was built.

One of the adobes built in Solano County that still survives, although it is rapidly falling into disrepair, is the Hastings adobe located near Collinsville at the end of Stratton Lane. It still has a "wooden shell" built over the original adobe that protects it somewhat, but a leaky roof and no maintenance eventually will result in total destruction of this historic structure.

Lansing W. Hastings was a Mormon agent sent to California to select a new site for a colony. It was to be called "Montezuma." This was the same Hastings that misled the Donner Party, resulting in its being stranded at Donner Pass.

Hastings built the adobe in 1846 and may have occupied it for about three years before abandoning it. He established the first ferry across the Sacramento River between today's Collinsville and New-York-of-the-Pacific. New-York-of-the-Pacific is now Pittsburg.

The adobe was 27 feet by 27 feet with 22-inch thick walls. It was divided into four rooms by 11-inch thick adobe walls.

Between 1846 and 1853, adventurers, homesteaders, cowboys and ranchers and even counterfeiters took temporary shelter in the adobe.

In 1853 L. P. Marshall and two sons took over the adobe, repaired it, and finally acquired Hastings' squatter's claim to the premises.

Later, the adobe passed into the hands of the Stratton family who covered the structure with the wooden shell, added a living room, and used the original house for bedrooms and a kitchen.

While the adobe was occupied it was well-maintained, but suffered considerable damage from neglect and vandalism after the Strattons sold the property in 1964. The Solano County Historical Society placed the building on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

PG&E acquired the property for use as a coal-fired electricity generation plant and still owns it though the plant never materialized. Access to the adobe requires permission from PG&E.

In 1844, John Bidwell was given a 17,000-acre grant named Los Ulpinos. Its south boundary was roughly where the Ryer Island Ferry Landing is and was bounded on the east by the Sacramento River going north.

Little was known of the location of the adobe he built other than the testimony made by S. J. Hensly during Bidwell's land case in 1858 as follows: "I took Mr. Bidwell on board of a schooner to the land with some hands to make a settlement. They remained there and built an adobe house in which an Englishman who had charge of building remained during the winter. The next season a small parcel of land was cultivated and in the winter of 1845-46 the house was occupied by Pearson B. Reading and hands. There are now several dwelling houses on the land." The adobe was abandoned about 1847.

Tradition has it that the adobe was on the land of George H. Jenkins. The assessment rolls of the years concerned locate the Jenkins property, 40 acres, as on the Sacramento River, south of the road at Newton Landing (about halfway between Ryers Ferry Landing and Rio Vista) and of the land of Dozier and north of that of Mrs. C. C. Champion. That would put the adobe about a third of the way to Ryers Ferry from Rio Vista. Nothing remains of the site.

Jose Francisco Armijo came to California in 1835. For a while he was on the Peralta Rancho San Antonio and then on the Suisun rancho of Gen. Vallejo.

While the exact location of Armijo's palizada, built about 1840, is not known for sure, studies have placed it about 550 feet south of the county line and about seven-tenths of a mile east of Suisun Creek. That would be about halfway between today's Suisun Valley Road and Gordon Valley Road just south of Solano County's border with Napa.

Armijo built his adobe home about 1845 and took two years to complete it. It stood near a large rock-lined spring near a cottonwood and old pear trees and about 100 feet northwest of the spring. This would place it roughly one-eighth of a mile northwest of today's Rancho Solano Clubhouse. The old road from Benicia to Sacramento passed by Armijo's home. The house was razed as a result of damage from the earthquake of 1892.

In Benicia, the earliest homes were built of adobe and William I. Tustin constructed the first. It stood on the southeast corner of H and West Second Streets, on Lot 13 of Block 20.

William I. Tustin stated in his recollections that he arrived at Sutter's Fort on April 1, 1845, and that in the November following he built a log house in Tehama County. By the spring of 1846 he had gone as far north as Cottonwood Creek in Shasta County and later arrived in Sonoma in early summer 1847. It was there he first heard of the new town of Benicia. He arrived there just as O'Farrell was completing his survey of the town site about June 8, 1847.

The date of the construction of the adobe is taken from Tustin's own statement in his recollections, that after arranging with Dr. Semple for lots and for their payment, he "commenced to build a house, the first one ever erected in Benicia." It was an adobe house and was built in 1847. The dimensions were 40 feet by 20 feet; it had two rooms, was one story and had four windows, two in each room. Half of the house was shingled and the other half thatched with tules. It had a fireplace in one room. The house was razed sometime after the 1880s, perhaps after the earthquake of 1892.

In a 1940 study made by Professor Hendry of the University of California, he stated, "Of the 37 houses listed (in the report), seven were in Benicia and the other 30, or 80 percent, were on the ranchos. Of the 37 buildings, 27, or 73 percent, were of adobe. Dates or approximate dates were found for the whole list and range from 1824 to 1858; the major construction period was the 1840s, the late 1840s for Benicia and early 1840s for the ranchos.

"Of the 37 known houses only seven, or 19 percent, are still standing (in the 1940s) and of these five are of adobes - two in Benicia and three on the ranchos.

"The 37 houses listed are not all the houses erected. The Solano rancheria had a few adobes aside from that of Chief Solano and a number of palizadas or other structures, but the number is not known. Undoubtedly, on the ranchos were other buildings than these listed, but knowledge of their existence has been lost."

Today, the few remaining historic old adobes are not receiving the care they should

have, and unless they do, Solano County could lose more of its valuable heritage of the past.

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