

## Disasters follow pioneer family

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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My last column talked about the experiences of Luzena Stanley Wilson and Mason Wilson in Sacramento during the winter of 1849-1850. The information is based on Luzena's memoirs and the research by Fern Henry in her new book "My Checkered Life: Luzena Stanley Wilson in Early California."

After losing all their possessions in the floods of the American River in early spring 1850, the Wilsons took their two children and their muley cow and set out for the new mining town of Nevada City. Within a day of her arrival, Luzena once again had started a boardinghouse, which she called "El Dorado Hotel." Over the next months, it grew from a trestle table to a wood frame house with several rooms.

With the Nevada City population swelling rapidly to nearly 10,000 residents, this endeavor was very successful. "From the first day, it was well patronized," she remembered, "and I shortly after took my husband into partnership." Luzena rarely mentions her husband in her memoirs and never by his name, leaving much room to speculate on their precise relationship. At the height of the hotel's success, Luzena had up to two hundred boarders, each paying \$25 per week.

They added a store and Luzena also safeguarded gold dust for the miners, in fact acting as a form of bank. "At times I have had a larger amount of money in my charge than would furnish capital for a country bank," she recalled. "Many a night have I shut my oven door on two milk pans filled high with bags of gold dust, and I have often slept with my mattress literally filed with the precious metal. At one time I must have had more than two hundred thousand dollars lying unprotected in my bedroom ...."

Theft still was unheard of there at the time, and Luzena felt completely safe. Once, she was missing one of her own bags of coins. After much searching, she found her youngest son building houses with the coins in the middle of the street.

Eighteen months later, disaster struck. A fire swept through the town, burning most of the wooden buildings and ramshackle tent structures. Like most people, the Wilson's money was invested in their hotel and store, and the fire rendered them - once again - penniless.

Luzena fell ill after this misfortune and took several weeks in recuperating. The family decided to return to Sacramento, but found the city much changed. With the continued

influx of gold miners, the atmosphere had become rougher. Luzena recalled brawls, mob scenes, and even a public hanging.

The time had come to try something new. The Wilsons left Sacramento and the gold mines for good and turned west. Sometime in early spring 1851 they arrived "close by a tiny spring-fed stream, near the most-frequented route from the upper country to Benicia ... We were fascinated by the beauty of the little valley which already bore the name of Vaca from the Spanish owner of the grant within the limits of which it lay."

Mason immediately began to cut and dry the native oat grass, planning to sell it for \$150 a ton in San Francisco. By now an experienced hotelkeeper, Luzena erected her open-air trestle table and set out a sign "Wilson's Hotel."

"The accommodations were, perhaps, scanty," she noted in typically wry fashion, "but were hailed with delight by the traveling public, which had heretofore lunched or dined on horseback at full gallop, or lain down supperless to sleep under the wide arch of heaven. The boards from the wagon bed made my table, handy stumps and logs made comfortable chairs, and the guest tethered his horse at the distance of a few yards and retired to the other side of the hay-stack to sleep. The next morning he paid me a dollar for his bed and another for his breakfast, touched his sombrero, and with a kind 'good morning', spurred his horse and rode away, feeling he had not paid too dearly for his entertainment."

Within a month of leaving Nevada City, on April 21, 1851, the Wilsons purchased their first land in Solano County from L. B. Mizner and William McDaniel. The land, 200 acres, was situated along Alamo Creek, near the present Three Oaks Community Center. By the end of the year, they had added another 100 acres south of the town plat as well as three parcels in the town plat itself.

Luzena described the Vaca and Pena families in Lagoon Valley and the Wolfskill family as her only near neighbors, though several other families had settled in the area by 1851.

The family set about erecting a house with the help of Romulus Kennedy, a builder from Sacramento. All wood had to be transported from Benicia, and Kennedy claimed that the Wilson's house was the first wooden house in Vacaville.

After a summer of hard labor, Mason had two hundred tons of hay baled and stacked at Cache Slough for transport to the San Francisco markets. Once again, disaster followed him, this time in the form of early rains and rising waters, which swept away all the hay.

More trouble was to follow. Their property was part of the land grant dispute between Juan Manuel Vaca and William McDaniel. With ownership of the grant in dispute, squatters moved in fast.

“By night a whole party of surveyors had staked off half the valley and all the land we had bought,” Luzena recalled in her memoir, “and a band of squatters had built a rough cabin a half mile from us. When my husband returned at night (he had been away in Sacramento) he was furious, and he swore that he would either have the land or kill every man who disputed his ownership. Before it was light he left the house on his errand of ejectment, taking with him a witness, in case he should be killed or be forced to kill the squatters. He kissed me good-bye, hardly expecting to come back to me alive, for the squatters, many of whom knew and feared his reckless and determined purpose, would not have hesitated to dispose of him with a bullet.

“He walked straight to their cabin, and pushing aside the blanket hung for a door, found the intruders, six in number, sound asleep, and their guns standing loaded, ready for use, near at hand. Slipping softly in, he secured the six guns, and then, covering the sleepers with his own weapon, waked them.

“They were of course enraged but helpless, and at his command filed silently out of the cabin. Then, still under the pitiless aim of that steady gun, they silently and unresistingly watched the demolition and removal of their mushroom house. When the last stick of wood and scrap of material had been dragged away, the gun was lowered, and they were given a solemn warning never again to attempt the unlawful seizure of another man’s property under pain of death.”

This story more than most illustrates how far the Wilsons had moved away from their Quaker upbringing. It was not the only attempt the Wilsons had to fend off over the next few years. It would take seven years in courts before the matter was finally resolved, a time of uncertainty that weighed heavily on the family.

“The decisions of the Land Commissioners kept us in a state of continuous ferment,” wrote Luzena, “and for years we had not only a hard struggle to keep our land, but were in constant terror of the murderous shots of the infuriated men who desired to eject us. The ‘squatters’ were so much the topic of common conversation among us that even the children, left to invent their own amusements, used to play at being ‘squatters.’ Once, had I not rescued my youngest son, he would have been hanged, in mimicry of the punishment not usually discussed as a salient remedy for the ‘squatter troubles.’”

My next column will continue Luzena and Mason Wilson’s story in Vacaville.

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

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