

Misfortune bedevils early Vaca family

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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My last column talked about the challenges Luzena Stanley Wilson and Mason Wilson faced during their first year in Vaca Valley. 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."

By 1852, the Wilsons had settled into their new wooden house. Mason continued to purchase land, despite the squatter problems that he encountered on the land purchased from William McDaniel and Lansing B. Mizner. It would be another seven years, until 1858, before the Los Putos Grant title was rightfully assigned to Manuel Vaca and Juan Felipe Pena, in turn giving Mason title to the acreage he had purchased early on.

Using all her previous experience, Luzena once again turned her home into a hotel. Situated "where the road crosses the valley, and on the bank of the creek," the Wilson hotel was situated along the road crossing the Ulatis creek, which connected Sacramento, Napa, and Benicia. Today, this is the corner of Main Street and Davis Street in Vacaville, where the Walker Opera House stands.

The Masons became active in their tiny community. They and their neighbors hired a teacher to conduct the first school. In later years, Mason also supported the establishment of the Pacific Methodist College.

Besides the flourishing hotel business, Mason continued to add land to his holdings, to lease it or farm it himself. During the 1850s, he purchased blocks of property throughout the townsite as well as surrounding the town plat. By the end of the decade, the couple owned most of the townsite, 592 acres of surrounding property, and the hotel building.

In less than 10 years, they had become one of the wealthiest families in Solano County. Yet despite their strong investments in real estate and the hotel, the Solano and Napa directory of 1870/1871 still lists Mason Wilson as a farmer.

The 1850s also saw other additions to the family. On Jan. 12, 1855, Mason Jr. was born, followed on April 24, 1857 by Correnah Morehead Wilson, fourth child and first daughter of the couple. By then, Mason was 50 years old, while Luzena celebrated her 38th birthday a few weeks later.

With the many travelers the stagecoach brought regularly, the hotel prospered. The Wilsons hired a Sacramento architect and a contractor and built a new hotel, a two-story brick building. Completed in October 1858, it cost \$14,000, and featured 30 guest rooms, a large dining room-parlor, a billiard room and a post office. For years to come, Mason Wilson served as the Wells Fargo & Company agent.

Willis Jepson recalled in later years: "It was ... substantial for its day, and everything about it bespoke solidity and the comfort of a first-class country inn. The horse stages from Vallejo stopped in front of the wide door that opened into a large traveler's room with a great fireplace on the east side and a resplendent bar in the southwest corner. From here, a door led into a large well-appointed dining room whose windows looked out onto the spaces of a pleasant garden at the rear."

Hard work and a strong spirit of enterprise and community had finally led the Wilsons to success. As had happened to them so many times before, though, it was not meant to last.

In early 1867, Mason, who was then 60 years old, traveled to Texas, intrigued by the possibilities there. On his return, he tried to sell all his properties and to relocate to Texas. It is unclear why he was unable to sell. Likely, Luzena was unwilling to comply with his wishes.

Worse was to come. In December 1872, Mason inexplicably left his family. The Weekly Solano Republican speculated on Dec. 12, 1872:

"UNACCOUNTABLE AFFAIR: On Wednesday of last week, Mason Wilson, one of the oldest, wealthiest, best-known and most highly respected citizens of Vacaville, left home to go to Dixon on business, telling his wife that he might be gone all night. He remained away all night, and the next morning, Mrs. Wilson, instead of greeting her husband as expected, received a letter from him, written at Dixon, informing her that she would probably never see him again; that all he had was hers during her lifetime, but that he wished it to go to their two youngest children at her death. Since then, it has been ascertained that on the day he left home he was in Sacramento endeavoring to purchase \$500 in greenbacks, but no further trace of him has been found. As he was known not to be embarrassed financially (owning property to the value of \$75,000 with \$9,000 on deposit in Sacramento); as he was happy in his domestic relations, and as he was in robust health, there is no assignable cause for this strange freak from a hitherto staid and sober citizen."

After nearly 28 years of marriage, Luzena suddenly found herself alone with her four children.

Further information can be gleaned from another article in the Weekly Solano Republican on Jan. 16, 1872: "Mason Wilson has been heard from," it reported. "He was in southwestern Missouri, and intimates that the reason for his leaving here was that there was a plan on foot for sending him to the Asylum in Stockton; which is conclusive evidence that he was a fit subject for that institution."

An anonymous letter published a year later, on Jan. 23, 1873, and possibly written by the Wilsons' 24-year-old son Jay, who had followed his father to Texas, seemed to support the assumption of mental illness: "A. M. Stevenson informs us that he is in receipt of a letter from Dallas, Texas under date of Jan. 7 saying that Mason Wilson, of Vacaville, was in that place, and the writer thought that he exhibited evidences of insanity. The writer also said that he had facilities for keeping track of him, and would do so until further advised."

Jay seems to have stayed with his father in Texas. Luzena never saw her husband again.

Luzena's oldest son, Thomas, took over his father's work. He and his mother continued to farm the more than 600 acres and to administer their other businesses. In 1874, she finally sold the Wilson Hotel to Ike Davis for \$ 6,000 in gold.

By 1875, her two younger children were also settled. Mason Jr. lived in San Francisco, where he worked as a clerk in a brokerage office, and daughter Correnah had just graduated from Mills College.

In June 1877, Luzena and Correnah took a trip to Yosemite. On their return, they found Luzena's home burned down to its foundation. The fire, possibly arson, had started in the Wilsons' barn and had quickly spread to the house and neighboring businesses, eventually devouring half the town.

Luzena lost everything, her house and her possessions, all of it uninsured, in addition to two other buildings of hers, also uninsured.

A week later, a spark from the Vaca Valley railway train set fire to one of her wheat fields, destroying 100 acres of crop, two adjoining properties and some harvested grains.

Prophetically, the Weekly Solano Republican wrote on June 15, 1877: "Misfortunes seldom come singly." In October, with the rebuilding efforts of Vacaville's citizens barely under way, another fire hit the downtown business district, destroying it completely, except for the brick hotel building the Wilsons had built so many years before and sold in 1874. Luzena lost another two uninsured buildings in this fire.

This time, Luzena decided to give up and moved herself, Thomas and Correnah to San Francisco to live with Mason Jr.

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, is available at the Vacaville Museum Gift Store, from Carl Mautz Publisher, or can be ordered through any book dealer.

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