

Luzena Wilson sold land to Buck family

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This column concludes the story of Luzena Stanley Wilson and Mason Wilson. 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."

In June and October 1877, fires in downtown Vacaville destroyed Luzena Stanley Wilson's home, her personal possessions and some of her other properties throughout town. The following year she decided to move to San Francisco.

At the time, her youngest son, Mason Jr., lived at 1546 Howard Street. Her other two children, Thomas and Correnah, also joined them there. Her fourth son, Jay, lived in Texas with Mason Wilson.

Luzena's youngest child and only daughter, Correnah, seems to have spent much of her time before her marriage in 1886 in the company of her mother.

Correnah was born and raised in Vacaville. Her early schooling took place at the Pacific Methodist College, followed at age 12 by several years at the College of Notre Dame, a Catholic girls' school in San Jose. She was an outstanding scholar and was named a Distinguished Student during her second year. Besides the serious subjects of grammar, arithmetic, orthography, penmanship, bookkeeping, and domestic economy, she especially excelled in piano and drawing.

In 1872, when she was 15, she went to Mills Seminary (now Mills College) in Oakland. Here she studied algebra, natural history, mythology and natural philosophy as well as geometry, botany and meteorology. She also continued instructions in painting and drawing. Throughout her long life she enjoyed drawing and painting. Some of her works have been preserved to this day. She graduated from Mills College in 1876, returning to Vacaville and then to San Francisco.

During the winter of 1880-1881, Correnah fell seriously ill and needed a long recuperation period. It was during this time that Luzena recounted her pioneer experiences, which Correnah wrote down and - most likely - also edited. These recollections, titled originally "A Woman's Reminiscences of Early Days," were first published anonymously, signed with just a "W" in a series of columns in the San Francisco "Argonaut" during the spring of 1881. The bound, typewritten manuscript was donated by Correnah to Mills College and has been preserved in its library.

Despite the devastating fires of 1877, Luzena still owned large amounts of properties in and around Vacaville, which Thomas managed for her, and which provided her with a good income.

On September 5, 1882, Luzena's estranged husband, Mason Wilson Sr. died in Texas. Over the last 10 years, since he so abruptly had left Luzena and the children, he had acquired farmland near Waco, Texas. He later deeded this land to his son, Jay, who had come out to live with his father and had started his own family there.

In his will of 1867, Mason had left all his properties to Luzena, much of it land in and around Vacaville. Among it were 148 acres north and west of town, which Luzena sold in 1887 to the Buck family for \$88,560. The Buck family transformed part of this land into the Buck's Addition, developing it into the premier residential address of Vacaville: Buck Avenue.

Over the next few years, Luzena moved several times, living mostly with her daughter, Correnah, and son, Thomas. She also began to travel quite a bit, including at least one yearlong trip to Europe in 1883, accompanied by her daughter, Correnah, repeated by a second one around 1891.

On September 8, 1886, Correnah married Edward C. Clark. The San Francisco Call reported of the ceremony on September 14: "The wedding of Miss Correnah Wilson and Mr. E. C. Wright was very quietly celebrated on Wednesday last at the First Unitarian Church, by the pastor, Rev. Horatio Stebbins. The ceremony was witnessed by a small party of relatives and friends, and immediately after the nuptials the happy couple started on their bridal tour. The wedding guests included Mr. and Mrs. Crocker, Mrs. Lansing, the misses McGerry, Mr. and Mrs. A. Wigmore, and the bride's mother and brothers."

Correnah became a prominent figure in San Francisco society. She was invited to join the Century Club of California in 1889, which to this day has some of her pastels hanging in its rooms. She was the club's president in 1904-05, overseeing the construction of the new clubhouse on Sutter and Franklin Street. Among her many other civic involvements, she also served in later years as a trustee on the board of Mills College. Childless, her estate eventually reverted to Mills College. To this day, her endowment funds the Correnah Wright Lecture Series on Contemporary Art.

After Correnah's marriage, Luzena and Thomas moved into what was to become her final residence, the Hotel Pleasanton at the northwest corner of Sutter and Jones in San Francisco. This was one of the then popular "Family And Tourist" hotels, charging between \$2 and \$3.50 per day.

Luzena stayed in the hotel for the next 14 years. After having run her own hotels for so many years of her life, she finally got to enjoy a comfortable life of being cared for by others.

She also frequently visited friends in Vacaville and may even have considered moving back there at some time, but nothing came out of these plans.

In 1887, her youngest son, Mason Jr., 32, died. He left behind his wife Caroline and their five-year old son, Mason.

Luzena died from thyroid cancer on July 11, 1902, in San Francisco, according to Fern Henry's research. She was 83 years old. The Vacaville Reporter ran a short obituary on July 19: "... Deceased was one of the pioneers of this county. She was the wife of Mason Wilson and she and her husband were among the first settlers in Vacaville. They established a hotel here in early days and conducted it for thirty years. All the early residents of the county will remember them. Mrs. Wilson made her home at the Hotel Pleasanton where she resided up to her last illness when she was removed to her daughter's residence. ... "

Her life was full of challenges and hard work, which she tackled with determination, an unusual ability to recognize and seize any opportunity, and a keen sense of humor. Fern Henry sums this up: "Her courage was tested repeatedly, and though she may have bent under the strain, she never broke down. The source of her inner strength surely had its roots in her Quaker family, where independent thought was encouraged while outward conformity was required. Though she left the Quakers early in life, her character was shaped by her early training which taught her the equality of women, a true work ethic, honesty and community-mindedness."

My next column will follow the life of Thomas and Jay Wilson.

The publication by 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 Publisher, or can be ordered through any book dealer.

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