

Thomas Wilson led a varied life

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, April 04, 2004

My last column covered Luzena's last years and Correnah's life. This column will talk about the oldest son, Thomas. The information once again 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."

Mason Wilson and Luzena Stanley Wilson had four children. Thomas Stanley Wilson was born Sept. 21, 1845; Jay Crittenden Wilson was born June 20, 1848, both in Andrew County, Mo. They made the long trek overland to Sacramento as toddlers.

After the family had settled permanently in Vacaville, Mason Wilson Jr. was born Jan. 12, 1855, followed by the couple's only daughter, Correnah Morehead Wilson on April 24, 1857.

Thomas was 5 years old when the family finally reached Vacaville, Jay was nearly 3. Providing education to the growing number of families was a major concern during the early years, spurring the Wilsons into first bringing a teacher to town and in later years to support the Pacific Methodist College.

In 1855, James W. Anderson of Vacaville, the second superintendent of schools in Solano County, founded the private Ulatis Academy. In later years, Hester Harbison recalled, "The first school was not in the then very small town, but out in the country about one and a half miles east of Vacaville. The fame of the teacher, J. W. Anderson, was handed down to me by my two sisters and two of my older brothers, all of whom attended his school. Later, when the population of the town had increased, Prof. Anderson moved his school into town."

This new academy, a handsome two-story brick building with separate boarding houses for boys and girls, was relocated on the south side of Ulatis Creek in 1858, but the school closed in the same year. Two years later, in 1860, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, purchased the buildings, and opened the Pacific Methodist College in 1861. Thomas was a student of this institution until 1862 when he graduated at age 16.

Two years previously, in 1860 Mason Wilson, Thomas' father, had openly voted for Abraham Lincoln, despite the strong Southern sentiments in the community. It was thus not surprising that Thomas would be sent to join the U.S. Naval Academy in Newport, R.I., in 1862. While the school year started in the fall, Thomas did not arrive until the

following spring. We do not know whether he took the long route across the country or the marginally safer sea voyage. Either way, it must have been quite an adventure for the young man.

For the next two years, he studied at the academy. Subjects included geometry and trigonometry, infantry tactics and gunnery. Two months each year he spent at sea on a practice ship. He graduated in November 1864 as one of the top five midshipmen of his class.

Thomas was assigned to the USS Vermont and spent the next few months on this ship until his resignation from the Navy in August 1865. Despite the heroic tales that The Reporter told about his exploits, which included having been wounded during the battle at Vicksburg in 1863 (when in fact he was still at the academy), it seems that he did not actually see any active battle engagements.

His next step after his resignation from the Navy was Harvard Law School. He entered in September 1865 and graduated two years later with a Bachelor of Laws degree.

His education completed, he returned to San Francisco and joined the law office of John B. Felton, Esquire.

The following year saw his marriage to Margaret McGary on Dec. 3, 1868, in Suisun. Maggie, as she was known, and Thomas had known each other since childhood. Like the Wilsons, the McGary family was one of the early settlers of the Vaca Valley, though in later years they had resettled in Cordelia. The McGarys were a Catholic family, requiring Maggie to obtain a special dispensation for her marriage.

Only a few months later, word of the newly discovered silver mines near Hamilton, Nev., reached Thomas, who immediately left to try his luck. It is unclear whether he took Maggie with him or - more likely - left her behind with his or her parents. Nor do we know how long they were separated. At any rate, barely two years later, the couple divorced. The marriage remained childless.

From here-on, especially after Mason Sr. left his family so abruptly for Texas, Thomas worked with his mother, assisting her in her many endeavors: running the hotel in Vacaville, managing the farm and administering the large amount of real estate Mason and his mother had acquired over the years. He also kept his own law office in San Francisco, though he never seems to have practiced law, and divided his time between the city and Vacaville.

Throughout his later years, he played an active and supportive role in the Vacaville community. He served as a director on the California Normal and Scientific School (the

successor of the Pacific Methodist College), joined the Masonic Lodge and even contributed 36 palm trees in 1904, which were planted along Ulatis Creek and still can be admired along today's CreekWalk.

Like his sister Correnah, he also played a role in San Francisco society. He joined the Bohemian Club, an influential private men's club in 1902. In 1906, he served on the club's board of directors. In the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake, he, like many fellow members, tried to rescue valuable art, paintings and other objects from the fires that eventually destroyed the club building located at Post and Grant streets.

Club history remembers his efforts: "Among the horrifying incidents of that fateful evening there was one which brought a thrill of humor to many hearts that so far had felt nothing but sorrow. It was discovered that during the most exciting moments of the work of salvage, (Charley) Dickman had rescued from the office the cards that recorded debts for supplies. On being chided for having been so thoughtless as to preserve evidences of debts that might never have to be discharged, Charley replied, "That was Director Tom Wilson's fault, not mine. How can you fancy any sane excitement that could possibly lead me into perpetuating last month's posted list?" His fellow club members likely teased Thomas Wilson for a long time for having rescued the club's debt records.

His later years saw him increase in wealth, but with steadily declining health. Late in 1921, he was under constant medical care and had to be hospitalized several times. On the day after Christmas, at age 76, he decided to end his life with a .38-caliber revolver.

His considerable estate was left to his sister, Correnah, and his four grand nieces and nephews, children of his brothers Jay, and "all equally dear to me."

My next column will follow the life of Jay Crittenden and Mason Wilson Jr., 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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