

Wanderlust strikes a son of early Vacaville

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This is the final column on the family of Luzena and Mason Wilson and their four children. The information is based on the research by Fern Henry in her book "My Checkered Life: Luzena Stanley Wilson in Early California."

Luzena and Mason Wilson named their second son Jay Crittenden Wilson. His older brother Thomas had received his mother's maiden name, Stanley, as his middle name.

The name Crittenden does not appear on Luzena's immediate family tree, and it is possible that it came out of Mason's family, of which practically nothing is known. Jay was born in Andrew County, Mo., on June 20, 1848, and began his journey to California at barely a year old.

Like his brother Thomas before him, Jay, too, visited the newly established Ulati Academy, led by Professor Anderson. Two of his classmates there may have been Eliza Melissa and Harriet Josephine Allison, daughters of Josiah Allison. All three likely enrolled that same year in the newly formed Pacific Methodist College in 1861. Another student in that class was Zebulon Butler Donaldson, future husband of Eliza Melissa.

Eliza's and Harriet's younger sister, Hester Allison Harbison, said about the college in later years: "Two reasons for choosing our town were its location and the fact that a number of citizens in town and country ... were able and willing to subscribe liberally to a fund for the establishment and maintenance of a college, in order that their children might have the advantages of a higher education.

At that time there was no state university, and, I think, no college in Northern California. Students came to this college from all parts of Northern California, at least as far north as Tehema (sic) County, from cities and farms ..." Josiah Allison and Mason Wilson were two of the citizen sponsors.

The students undertook classes in astronomy, botany, geology, international law, natural theology, criticism, and moral philosophy. Jay's graduation date was scheduled for May 18, 1865. His commencement speech was titled "The Tyranny of Custom."

Three weeks before the ceremony, on April 28, 1865, the college was destroyed by arson. On May 5, 1865, the Weekly Solano Herald reported on the fire, speculating that: "As there had been no fire in the building for two weeks past, and as no part of it

was occupied at night, the conclusion is irresistible that the fire was the work of some dastardly wretch who sought thus to vent his spite against those having charge of the institution, whether prompted by personal feeling or partisan animosity; though we are slow to believe that anyone who has shared the grief which has so recently overwhelmed the nation (the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14), caused by democratic lawlessness, would resort to kindred measures to express his disapproval of the stand taken by the president and faculty of the college."

It was always believed that the college was burned because it belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and thus to the opponents of Lincoln's policy.

The graduation ceremony had to be moved. "A large tent was hastily erected (on the lawn of the young ladies boarding house on East Main Street)," recalled Hester Harbison, "and in this was held the commencement. I was there. This class consisted of four girls, all residents, one of them the daughter of the college president, (Dr. Lucky) and eight young men, only two of whom were residents. The ages of these graduates ranged from seventeen (my sister (Harriet) to twenty-eight."

For the next few years, Jay seems to have worked in the area, including possibly for the Vaca Valley and Clear Lake Railroad, for which his father served as the first president.

But then wanderlust struck him. The year 1870 finds him in San Diego, where he worked with a partner in herding sheep. Two letters preserved in the Vacaville Museum's Harbison House collection offer a tantalizing glimpse into the young man's personality.

Both letters were addressed to Eliza Melissa Allison. The first one, written on April 29, 1870, opened: "My ever to be remembered friend: It may seem late to you for me to undertake to renew a correspondence with one who has ever been to me a friend, both faithful and true, and perhaps I may incur your displeasure by doing so.

Notwithstanding I did not ask your permission to renew it. I will attempt to do so hoping that you will at least pardon this one intrusion. As far as the mere idea of receiving letters from Vacaville is concerned, I must say that I take little interest in that. There are some residing in that vicinity whose friendship I prize and whose kind words I will always remember. It is to be presumed that my business in this section is known to anyone who took sufficient interest to inquire.

"My own opinions have never been my guide for there have always been some gray heads willing to advise. Having been taught now by experience that my own judgment is as good as anyone's, I will endeavor here after to allow myself not to hearken to the wisdoms of fifty years ago."

He mentioned having seen her uncle Robert Allison several times, who owned a cattle ranch in the San Diego area.

He continued: "Should I not succeed in making ends meet this year, it is only a few leagues to the Apache country and I find on careful examination that I am only half civilized. A total indifference in regard to the result of such matters might seem to presage certain ruin, but I am not able to find any reason why I should not as well now as ten years hence go to utter ruin. ...

"It will perhaps not be long before we make our advent to the regions of gold. Should I conclude to make another attempt at mining, rest assured you will never see me again. There are certain things must be accomplished before I ever set foot in Solano again.

"I occasionally hear some news in regard to your neighborhood that is startling in the extreme, and should some things I have heard hinted prove true, farewell to all my long cherished hopes."

Two things can be read from these somewhat melodramatic lines. For one, Jay seemed to have left his home after having some of his actions doubted by "some gray heads willing to advise." Experience now had taught him to trust his own judgment, a topic that he repeated in his second preserved letter six weeks later. Yet his actions, being "on the tramp," "a few leagues to the Apache country," "only half civilized" and looking for opportunities in gold mining also leave the impression of a somewhat wild 21 year old. One can only wonder what he felt he had to accomplish to be able to return to Solano County.

The other interesting theme is the veiled hints about someone for whom he cares back home. His next letter, in answer to Eliza Melissa's letter of May 28, is dated June 9:

"... Have not yet fallen in love with any of the rich Spanish Senoritas and think I know girls in Solano I would prefer in poverty to anyone I have seen in San Diego with wealth. Find on examination that I am not so much disposed to turn rough as I thought at one time I was. However, it will be necessary for me to live more than two or three years and I can then become again civilized.

"Expected to hear of Josie's wedding before now. I am glad she is not married and regret very much she cannot know some things that I do. Marriage is an important event in one's life and is generally a turning point. Notwithstanding all the foolishness I talked too young. I have one selected that I will get if I can sometime, for I think she will just suit me"

One can only speculate whether this young lady was Eliza Melissa herself, who was

three years older than Jay, or her sister Harriet, born the same year as Jay. If it was Eliza Melissa, Jay was in for disappointment. She married Zebulon Butler Donaldson, their old school friend, the following year, 1871. Their marriage was not happy; Donaldson left her within a year of the birth of a daughter. Melissa died in 1873.

Jay's life changed in early 1873, too, when he followed his father, Mason Wilson, to Texas. He bought land near Perry, Texas, and farmed together with his father. In 1878, Jay married the daughter of a prominent rancher, Margaret Jane Naler. They had a son, Asa Cohen Wilson, in 1880, and a daughter, Rowena, in 1884. In 1905, Jay and his wife moved to Dallas, where he operated a real estate business. He died on Aug. 3, 1910, aged 62.

Today, of the four Wilson children, Thomas, Jay, Mason Jr., and Correnah, only Jay's children have descendants into our time.

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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