

## Rhyme and reason behind early Solano poet

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, October 10, 2004

I don't suppose that most newcomers to Vacaville have ever heard of Edwin Markham. Some may have heard of the poem, "Man With a Hoe," but don't know that a man who once lived in the now-contentious Lagoon Valley wrote it. So, let's look at a little history of Charles Edwin Anson Markham and some interesting contradictions.

Charles Markham was born in Oregon City, Oregon, on April 23, 1852 to Samuel and Elizabeth Markham. Unfortunately, his father, Samuel, wasn't quite sure that the child was his and the couple had been separated for several months. It was a pretty innocuous beginning, and there was nothing that could foretell of the fame and controversy Charles would gather in later years.

Before the breakup and finally the divorce, the family included five boys and one girl (including Edwin). Three of the boys were from Samuel's first marriage.

Samuel and Elizabeth tried to resolve their differences over time but without success. Before finally getting divorced, Elizabeth bought some land in Clatsop County and operated a small dry goods store to support her two sons, Charles and Columbia and daughter Louisa. Samuel bought 600 acres 50 miles south of Oregon City, built a ranch and settled in with two of his grown sons. Charles' brother, Columbia, was born deaf, so most of the work on the family farm fell on his shoulders as well as taking care of his brother.

When Elizabeth and Samuel finally divorced, Elizabeth, Charley, Columbia and Louisa moved to California and settled in Lagoon Valley on a large ranch. There wasn't much of a home, just a one-room house and a barn. Lagoon Valley was a nice place to live, but daily chores kept Charles very busy ... and lonely. Louisa soon married and moved away and Columbia was sent away to the California School for the Deaf.

Elizabeth, an overbearing mother, couldn't possibly run the ranch by herself and never imagined that her remaining son might get the itch to leave. At this point the history of Charles Edwin Markham gets a little fuzzy. There is no doubt that he ran away from home in 1868 at the age of 16. What happened during that episode in his life is subject to question.

Local lore states that Markham's mother caught up with him in the Berryessa Valley. Fourteen members of Vacaville Union High School's history class of 1930-31 produced

a pamphlet titled "Prunings From Vaca Valley," with the intention of preserving a few facts and recollections of the pioneers that settled our area.

As part of their research, Edith Bassford wrote a letter to Edwin Markham requesting some of his reminiscences. His reply did not add much to the class project, although he did provide one of his poems, "The Man With the Hoe," which the class published in its booklet.

But, he did ask a question that prompted a response from another notable of Vacaville, Meredith Miller, an old friend of Markham's. He wondered what ever happened to his old "chum" John Huckins, whom he had run away from home with in 1865. Note the difference in dates. In this version Markham was 13 years old. Meredith Miller wrote:

"I was born on what is now the Blake ranch in Pleasants Valley in 1860. When I was a very small boy, I was standing on the back porch of the house. I saw two boys, mounted on an old white horse, kicking, fighting and beating, trying to get up speed. Their efforts were accompanied with but little success. One of these boys was John Huckins, the other was Edwin Markham. They were running away, going to see the world and all that was in it. Edwin didn't have any hoe, but John had an old musket, which could raise more consternation in those days then (sic) the hoe. That evening someone else was doing some hard riding. It was Mrs. Markham, Edwin's mother. She stopped long enough to get what information she could about the runaways, and was gone again. The next day she overhauled them in Berryessa Valley, several miles this side of Monticello. I never heard what argument she used, but I presume she convinced him that the public would like to read some pretty nifty poems in about thirty or forty years, and he was elected to get 'em up."

In another article written by Western history writer, Jan Holden, in the September 2004 issue of "Tombstone Epitaph," she wrote that Markham at the age of 16 ran away from home.

According to Holden, Markham wanted to return to Oregon to live with his father. Charley spent nearly six months working his way at various ranches learning the lore of the cowboy. During his time of freedom from his mother, he decided to go by his second name, Edwin, because he felt it was more befitting the literary life he was wanted to pursue.

Apparently while Edwin was gone his mother married again, but it was short and quickly ended in failure. Holden wrote that she then tracked Edwin down and pleaded with him to return home where he belonged. He agreed to go back with the provision that he be allowed to complete his schooling. She reluctantly agreed as long as it didn't interfere with the work at the ranch.

So now there are two versions of his running away, both recording that his mother convinced him to return home but with a major difference. For my money, I would be more inclined to believe Holden's story because of the age differences because Meredith was only 8 years old when he observed the runaways and wrote his recollections 63 years later. But then again, I have no proof, and that's one of the things required to be accurate. It is what makes researching history both frustrating and interesting.

After returning to the ranch in Lagoon Valley, Edwin continued his quest for knowledge. He eventually attended Vacaville's California College, where he quickly gained a reputation as a fairly rough character. He broke up a couple of classrooms and attacked one of his teachers, Samuel D. Woods. Despite this little problem, over time, Woods and Edwin became close friends and in later years Edwin wrote that he was greatly influenced in his writing by the competency and the caring he'd witnessed in Woods.

After graduating from the California College, Edwin received a certificate to teach. Working for meager wages in San Francisco wasn't to his liking, and wanting to continue his education he borrowed money from a cousin, moved to San Jose and attended the State Normal School, according to Holden.

Here again we find slightly different accounts of his life. Local historian Nancy Dingler wrote that after graduating from the State Normal School at San Jose, "He went to work as a teacher in the remote community of Los Berros."

I never heard of a Los Berros before, so I began looking. The closest similar name I could find that ever existed in California was Los Burros in the southwest corner of Monterey County. It was a small mining district organized in 1876 for mercury and gold mining. It no longer exists.

Both writers agree that after teaching in either San Francisco or Los Burros, he was offered a better teaching position in Coloma, the site of the gold discovery that started the gold rush.

I'll continue with the life of Edwin Markham in my next column.

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In columns I wrote about the first voyage of the world's largest train ferry, "Solano," Jan. 8, 2001 and later a history of the same on Feb. 10, 2002. In the second column I revealed that the Rubarth brothers were building an HO gauge model of the "Solano" in Michigan. The model is eight feet long and includes a portion of the docking facility at Port Costa. Good news! The Rubarths' are bringing the model to California temporarily

and it will be on display in Benicia for one day only at the Benicia Public Library on Wednesday, Oct. 13 noon to 8 p.m.

Model railroaders and history buffs won't want to miss this. Following that, it will be displayed at Old Port Costa High School Thursday, Oct. 14, at San Francisco Maritime Park on Saturday, Oct. 16, and at the Golden State Model Railroad Museum at Point Richmond Oct. 17.

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