

Towns vanished when railroad passed them by

By Jerry Bowen

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I have always been fascinated by old maps and the potential stories they reveal. Working at the Solano County Archives is especially intriguing because of its numerous old maps. Many of you already know something about the towns that will be described in a series of articles to follow, but for newcomers to Solano County or its history, it won't hurt to get acquainted with the communities that once served travelers and '49ers in the later 1800s. My thanks to James Davis for a suggestion about the town of Cement, which became the catalyst of this series of articles.

Silveyville

North of Vacaville and west of Dixon is the site of Silveyville. The town began its life in 1852 as a halfway house-hotel on the old Sacramento Road midway between Benicia and Sacramento. Elijah Silvey, for whom the town is named, migrated to California from Missouri in 1849 with his wife and two children.

Silvey built a corral and hotel on land he bought in 1850, hung a red lantern on a tall pole to attract weary travelers and he was in business.

A post office was established in 1853 and the infant township was named "Putah." Because the word "Putah" was so similar to the Spanish word for harlot, "puta," the name was changed to Silveyville in 1856.

That same year, George Gillespie established a store, and a year later Simmons and Long built a two-story saloon. Patrons were known to whoop it up on Saturday night in the saloon on the bottom floor, then piously attend church on Sunday morning on the upper floor.

Soon the growing community of Silveyville had a blacksmith shop, a telegraph office and a newspaper.

The editor of the newspaper was a strongly opinionated Democrat. He soon crossed swords with a similarly opinionated Union man, Dr. J.C. Ogburn. He shot and killed Ogburn and quickly left the country.

With the establishment of Presbyterian and Baptist churches in 1861 and a Methodist church in 1866, the town's future was looking up (so to speak).

But Silveyville's days were numbered. As so often happened in those early days, the railroad bypassed it, laying its tracks on land donated by Thomas Dickson about three miles east of the town. Here, the community of Dixon, the name was a result of misspelling Dickson's name on the railroad depot sign, - began to grow. Most of Silveyville's buildings were then moved to the new town of Dixon.

The Methodist Church is the only Silveyville building to survive a major fire in 1883 which destroyed most of Dixon. It is interesting to note that its survival was due to the fact that it was too large to cross the railroad tracks, so it was positioned away from the other structures in town and is still in use today.

Today Dixon flourishes but Silveyville has one home built in 1873 by Joachim Schroeder, still inhabited by descendants, and the recently erected Pony Express monument on the corner of Silveyville and Schroeder Roads.

Maine Prairie

Maine Prairie is another community that did not survive the coming of the Sacramento Northern Railroad.

In its early days it was simply an embarcadero on Cache Slough. In 1859, Capt. Merrithew, in company with J.N. Utter, settled on the south bank of the slough and opened a general merchandise, grain, and lumber business.

The following year, they founded the town of Maine Prairie. That same year, H.G. Deck, H. Wilcox and W.D. Vail formed a co-partnership known as Deck & Co., and began a general merchandising business on the north side of the slough opposite Merrithew & Co, and George King built a hotel.

The post office was established in 1862, and Capt. Merrithew served as the appointed postmaster. This was also the year a great flood inundated the land from Sacramento to Rio Vista. It swept the burgeoning village away as well as Rio Vista and several other river towns. Not a vestige was left where the town of Maine Prairie once stood.

The water was 12 feet deep in the streets and for miles in every direction. After the water subsided, most of the inhabitants returned, but only a few rebuilt at the old site. Most of them rebuilt further up the slough, where the land was more elevated. Mrs. Rebecca Lewis laid out a town plat on her land, about one-fourth of a mile above the original site of Maine Prairie and named it Alton.

Maine Prairie was a busy shipping port for the grain and hay grown as far away as Wolfskill's land in Winters. Before the days of railroads, Maine Prairie was one of the

most important grain-shipping points in the state of California. It was common to see 180 wagons in town in a single day, each drawn by an eight- or 10-mule team. The enormous grain-laden wagons gathered here to offload on ships bound for Sacramento, San Francisco and other points.

In 1863, 50,000 tons of grain were shipped from Maine Prairie, second only to the port of Stockton. But by the following year only one load of grain was brought into the town. After the railroad bypassed the community it slowly died even though a branch office of the Western Union Telegraph Co. was established there in 1870. Buildings were eventually abandoned, left to slowly decay or burn, becoming nothing more than a memory around the 1920s. The Dixon boat club occupies the site today.

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