

Winters easily could have had another name

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column we visited some early history centering around the Winters area and what were the beginnings of a bustling town named Buckeye northeast of today's Winters.

When the Civil War ended, new settlers arrived in Buckeye, many from Missouri. Among the new arrivals were many black families who were former slaves. They went to work on ranches surrounding Buckeye in the 1860s, or found employment in town. Several earned enough money to acquire their own properties.

Purebred stock improved the herds owned by the local ranchers and increased their income, but the good days were to end eventually. When a bad drought hit the area in 1863 and 1864, the cost of hay increased to \$150 a ton. After the drought, farmers had to go to Baja California to get wild oat seed in order to restart their own crops. Dropping back a little in history, brothers William and John Wolfskill had anticipated future sale of portions of their land grant. They had a survey done in 1858 and subdivided their 7,004 acres on the Yolo County side of Putah Creek into 21 lots ranging from 93 to 378 acres. Sales of the lots followed in quick succession.

In 1863, John Wolfskill bought a large tract of land from his brother. This was sold in 1865 to Theodore Winters, a nationally known stockman and horse-breeder with mining interests in Nevada. The sale consisted of nine parcels totaling 2,127 acres, for which he paid \$21,000. In addition, Winters purchased 870 acres of John Wolfskill's homestead in Solano County. The adobe home, built for Mathus Wolfskill near the old ford on Putah Creek, then became the residence of the Winters family. In addition, the Stevenson, McGary and Mathus Wolfskill families, all of whom relocated to Solano County, sold other plots on the Yolo County side of Putah Creek.

Theodore Winters is credited with promoting the sport of horse racing in the West and had a reputation as a successful breeder of fine thoroughbred horses. He established extensive stables and a training track across the creek from today's Winters. The rise of Winters and decline of Buckeye has a few interesting twists of its own. With the completion of the transcontinental rail line in 1869, decisions made by a few local prominent citizens would have a marked effect on the future.

Rail lines already had been built from Vallejo to Dixon, and Davisville (Davis) in 1868, and Washington (today's West Sacramento), Woodland and Vacaville in 1869. With

the arrival of the transcontinental railroad, new and better access to markets in the East was then a reality. Two bridges built across Putah Creek also made access to the rail heads much easier; one at the ford at the Winters Ranch and the other farther south and still in use - the Stevenson Bridge.

Even with these improvements, southwestern Yolo County farmers had a problem getting their goods to the railheads. An example of the difficulties was given when John Wolfskill's son Edward recalled that before completion of the Vaca Valley Railroad, "everything had to be hauled by horse and wagon to Sacramento or to Suisun ... a five-day journey: two days going, one day resting the horses and unloading and two days coming back."

The best solution was a link from Vaca-Station (Elmira) through Vacaville to Winters and beyond. The Vaca Valley Railroad Company, incorporated on April 12, 1869, was able to open a connecting line to the California Pacific Railroad from Vaca Station to Vacaville in June 1869. The Stevensons, who had relocated to Vacaville in 1870, became owners of the Vaca Valley Railroad Company and events that would bring Winters into existence were begun.

On Oct. 22, 1874, it was reported: "The Yolo Democrat is informed that a petition is in circulation for subscriptions to an extension of the Vaca Valley railroad to the north line of the Wolfskill grant, and says that the Stevensons pledge themselves that if \$30,000 is raised the road shall be built by the first of next July." Some initial proposals would have routed the Vaca Valley Railroad's northern extension from Vacaville over a Putah Creek crossing aligned with the town of Buckeye. But the idea of that route didn't reckon with Buckeye landowner Benjamin Ely.

According to Benjamin's grandson, Samuel, "He stood his ground" when faced with the Vaca Valley Railroad bisecting his property to come through the town of Buckeye. The railroad was forced to route along the western border of his land. It's also interesting that the railroad's new locomotive was named "Ben Ely" in 1875. Despite his disagreement with the route, he remained a generous supporter of the railroad's extension into Yolo County.

On Jan. 23, 1875 the Dixon Tribune announced, "The talked of project of extending the Vacaville road twelve miles northward to [Theodore] Winters' crossing of Putah creek, seems to have at last assumed a tangible form ... Last Saturday [January 17] there was a meeting of farmers and interested parties held at Winters' [residence] and the subsidy of \$30,000 asked for by the owners of the Vacaville Road, was all subscribed, while Mr. Winters himself donated to the company 40 acres of land for railroad purposes, and on which the company will lay off the Town of Winters. The president of the road, Mr. [G.B.] Stevenson, being present, stated that six miles of the proposed

road was surveyed and ready for grading, and that the ties and iron would be procured at once, and the road pushed through at the earliest practicable day.

“Meanwhile, the Turnpike road company, owning the franchise between Monticello and Winters’-fifteen miles long, will put their road in prime condition so that the crop of Berryessa valley may find an easy outlet to railroad facilities. The turning of the Berryessa and Pope valleys trade in this direction will perhaps make the Vaca road a self-sustaining enterprise, but it will be a heavy blow to Napa City. ...”

With that said, here’s a little piece of trivia: One other landowner, D.P. Edwards, has also been given credit for donating land for the town. The Yolo County records show no recorded gift of land by Winters, only a deed, dated May 6, 1875.

This deed states that G.B. Stevenson paid \$5,000 for those 40 acres supposedly donated by Theodore Winters.

This is the same site on which the railroad depot and the original town site were located. Stevenson purchased an additional 300-foot strip from Winters on Sept. 3, 1875 that allowed for expansion of the town site east of the railroad tracks.

One last item on this subject: According to historian Joann Leach Larkey, in her excellent book “Winters: A Heritage of Horticulture, A Harmony of Purpose,” “These disclosures should not discredit the good intentions and active interest, which both Theodore Winters and D.P. Edwards took in promotion of the rail line and the early development of the town of Winters.” By mutual agreement of the railroad investors, the proposed town site was named in honor of Winters after Edwards modestly declined the suggestion that it be named for him.

But for a simple forthright decision, Winters could have ended up being named “Edwards,” “Edwardsville,” or even possibly “Stevensons.”

In my next article we will see Winters grow to a prosperous community and the town of Buckeye become a ghost town.

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