Montezuma hides in remote corner of Solano

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, April 10, 2005

In my last column I discussed the history of a corner of Solano County that few of today’s citizens know about or visit, even though it is like time warping into the past.

Well, it is for me anyway. Since we’re in the area, I think I’ll delve into some more of the surrounding countryside.

Although the hills and wetlands of the Montezuma area were well known to early Spanish explorers and later during the gold rush as a route to the interior valleys, they were left mostly unsettled.

Spanish explorers under the command of Pedro Fages and Fray Juan Crespi first viewed the wide expanse we know today as the Delta in 1774 from Mount Diablo, but no effort was undertaken to explore the area. Following the founding of the San Francisco mission and presidio in 1776, more systematic explorations were slowly undertaken by the early 1800s.

According to Hubert Howe Bancroft - an author who wrote about western U.S. history - in September 1808, Gabriel Moraga and a company of 13 soldiers were sent into the San Joaquin-Sacramento Valley to find sites for the establishment of missions whose purpose was the conversion of the American Indians.

Moraga crossed the San Joaquin River and passed to the east of the Delta region, exploring the rivers that fed into it. He reported that there were no satisfactory mission sites.

Later expeditions’ main purpose were to chase down and punish neophytes (newly converted American Indians) who had run away from the established missions. As a result, there were several battles between the American Indians and Spanish over the next few years.

In October 1811, Padre Abella and 68 men sailed through the channels and sloughs to reach and explore the Sacramento River. They celebrated Mass near the mouth of the Sacramento River, and then traveled through Montezuma Slough to Suisun Bay where they found many American Indian villages. They reported that the area was a suitable location for a mission.
In 1817, Luis Arguello and his soldiers with some Indian boatmen sailed into the Delta in pursuit of runaways. They spent the first night camped at Montezuma Slough and camped near what is now Rio Vista the next night, then wandered through several sloughs before finding the Sacramento River and following it north.

Otto von Kotzebue sailed a Russian frigate up the Sacramento River in 1823, almost to the present city of Sacramento and reported an abundance of game but no sign of the Indians who once inhabited the area.

Americans frequented the Sacramento River and its tributaries as well as Hudson’s Bay Company trappers after Jedediah Smith came through the Sacramento Valley in 1828. Hudson’s Bay Company trappers from Fort Vancouver came as far south as Stockton each year between 1830 and 1844.

Although the Delta region was fairly well known to a growing number of foreign visitors, none of them seemed to have been attracted to the area to settle permanently.

Then, beginning in 1839, Mexico’s land grants encouraged settlers to petition for land, and John Sutter was the first to take advantage of the government’s offer. To be eligible, he had to agree to become a Catholic, a Mexican citizen, and comply with provisions for settling and improving his claim.

By 1841, other grants were made in what is now Solano County including General Mariano Vallejo, the Vaca and Pena families, Wolfskill and Jos F. Armijo. In 1844, John Bidwell obtained the Ulpinos grant a short distance above the mouth of the Sacramento River.

In compliance with the terms of the grant, Bidwell built an adobe house on his land on the west bank of the river. Bidwell’s nearest neighbor was a fellow American, Lansford Warren Hastings, an Ohio lawyer who first came to California via Oregon in 1843. He constructed a four-room adobe house with an attic early in 1846 on a knoll overlooking the junction of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers on his land grant.

This was the same area where Lansford Hastings tried to develop a town, naming it “Montezuma,” to flatter the Mexican government and make possible his request for a land grant. Hastings, some of you will recall, is the same person who is credited with causing the Donner Party disaster with misleading information to the trail to California. He attempted to establish a Mormon Colony on the land he occupied, but failed.

A passage from Bayard Taylor’s Eldorado described Montezuma in 1849 as “a solitary house on a sort of headland projecting into Suisun Bay and fronting its rival three-house city, New-York-of-the-Pacific.”
After Hastings built the adobe, he established the first ferry on the Sacramento-San Joaquin Rivers to the Contra Costa’s “New York of the Pacific” - today’s Pittsburg.

In 1847, Montezuma was suggested as the preferable mail route from San Francisco to “Fort Sacramento” (Sutter’s Fort) in winter when the road through Sausalito and Napa became impassable. The San Francisco newspaper California Star published a notice in February 1848 of a ferryboat at Montezuma, giving access from that point to the towns of San Jose, Monterey, Suisun, New Helvetia and the rest of the Sacramento Valley.

During the Gold Rush, thousands of adventurers began arriving on route to the mining districts on steamers bound for Sacramento. Many of them must have seen Montezuma and the grassy hills beyond as they passed by. Some of these men drifted back to towns to look for work after failing at mining, or settled on likely looking plots of ground and took up farming and ranching.

Merchants and tradesmen who had opened businesses in gold mining areas followed the miners back into the growing valley farming communities. But, early on, few of them saw any promise in Montezuma as a town site. Some, however, saw the potential of the grassy plains and low hills behind the river landing and decided to try their luck at agriculture.

One of the first were Lindsey Powell Marshall and his sons, Charles and John Knox, who drove a herd of cattle from the Midwest in 1852. They repaired the abandoned Hastings adobe and occupied it for the next 50 years. The structure was modified through the years by covering it with a painted wooden shell. The abandoned adobe still stands near Collinsville but is deteriorating rapidly because of lack of attention and a leaky roof.

Among the first settlers in the Montezuma Hills were Norwegians, Carl and Dan Thompson, and their friend, Steve Larsen, who jumped ship in San Francisco to go to the mines in 1852. They bought a boat, traveled up the Sacramento River and became lost in the Montezuma Slough. After abandoning their boat, they walked through the Montezuma Hills, eventually finding the river and finally reaching Sacramento before going on to the gold fields.

After failing at mining, they returned to the Montezuma Hills in 1854 where they raised Spanish merino sheep and long-horned cattle. Soon, other Scandinavians moved in and the area became known as “Little Norway.” Other families of Scandinavian origin such as the Olsens, Tonnessens and Arnebergs soon populated the area as well as a few English and Irish farmers who established preemption claims.
Many of the farms and ranches established in the 1850s were troubled by insecure property titles that may have discouraged permanent settlement and improvements to the land. Other settlers believed they were purchasing the land from legal owners - in one case, Juan M. Luco, assignee of a claim to a Mexican grant that was later proven to be fraudulent.

The infamous Luco (or El Sobrante) claim was for 270,000 acres - almost all the county’s land unclaimed by other grant owners - including the area of Montezuma and the Montezuma Hills. The Luco family was the assignee of Jose de la Rosa, an employee of Mariano Vallejo, who transferred the grant to them.

They submitted their claim to the U.S. Land Commission after the deadline, using the excuse that de la Rosa’s wife had taken the claim documents with her to Mexico. Since there were no other immediate claimants nor improvements to the land, the government had surveyed five townships and entered preemption claims for 100 settlers. When Congress authorized consideration by the Land Commission of the tardy claim in 1854, the General Land Office withdrew the remaining disputed lands from public sale.

I'll continue the story of Montezuma Hills and its troubled times in my next column.