

Tolenas Springs excavated 7-ton stone

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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In autumn of 1857, the Solano County Herald, located in Benicia, sent two reporters on "a stroll through the upper part of the county" with the intent to show its readers the latest developments in places like Suisun and Vacaville. The report was published on Sept. 26, 1857.

In my last column, the two men covered Green Valley, Suisun Valley and Suisun City. From there, they moved on to the northeastern parts of the county. Although Capt. Waterman had begun to lay out Fairfield during the previous year, the two reporters did not mention this development at all. Instead, they headed straight for the hills.

Their first stop was at the Tolenas Springs, situated west of today's Interstate 80 at Lyons Road. Local residents knew about the springs on the Armijo land grant, which they alternatively called Tolenas Springs, Suisun Soda Springs or Solano Mineral Springs. In 1855, the discovery of a quarry of high quality marble nearby drew much attention, leading to the formation of the Suisun Marble and Quarry Co.

Two years later, the newspaper's local guide brought the two reporters to the quarry, where they were lucky to observe the special excavation of a large slab of stone or marble.

"About four miles from the town, in the hills that separate Suisun from Laguna valley, is a lime and stone quarry; the stone from which that cannot be used for ornamental or building purposes, is put into the kiln and turned to lime. The company employs about ten or fifteen men, most of whom are Chinese, in the quarry.

"The day we were there, a stone was removed from the quarry to Suisun City measuring eight hundred cubic feet and weighing seven tons."

The size and weight of this stone posed some transportation problems. "At first it was hauled with four yoke of oxen, but meeting with some obstructions on the way, there were five more yoke hitched to the track, before it would move; having been once moved, however, they brought it into the town in the most triumphant manner. From the track it was placed upon a schooner to be taken to San Francisco, from whence it will be shipped to New York. The value of this stone in New York, as we have been informed by Mr. A. B. Meecham, of Suisun, is about eight hundred dollars."

The polished stone was highly desirable for its decorative effects. "The stone of this quarry is valuable for ornamental purposes, such as table tops, side boards, mantles, or anything where variegated colors look well. We saw a piece of it that had been cut in the shape of a column and afterwards polished which looked very ornamental; it was calculated to adorn a soda fountain in an apothecaries' shop, and nothing would seem more appropriate. When chipped off in small places, this stone looks as much like rosin as anything we know of. The curious may see a few small pieces of it in our office. To the politeness of

Mr. J. W. Owens, of Suisun, whose fast horses and good buggy brought us over the road in quick time, we are indebted for our knowledge of this great bed of wealth on Solano county."

From the Tolenas Springs, the two men and their buggy driver continued toward Vacaville. Their observations of the landscape they traversed, its scarcity of residents, and the curiosity which meeting between settler and traveler brought forth, recall similar observations by Luzena Stanley Wilson. She and her husband, Mason Wilson, had come to the same area two years prior.

"To proceed, we continued under the patronage of Mr. Owens - to whom we can recommend any one who wishes a good horse and buggy cheap - and started across the valley for Vacaville. While crossing the plain which gradually elevated as we approached the mountains, we were frequently met by the anxious immigrant, who thousands of miles from home, and having just entered upon one of the most beautiful valleys his eyes ever rested on, occasionally scrutinized us with the expectation, doubtless, of meeting an old friend to whom he might relate his trials and his victories in crossing the plains, as well as the happiness that he now enjoyed in having reached the haven of his expectations. But it happened that there was no recognition on either side, and each journeyed on their respective ways."

Like Wilson and her husband before, and many travelers thereafter, the two men were struck by the pastoral beauty of Lagoon Valley. Again, their sketchy description mirrors Wilson's observations about the California settlements. They also noted the lone squatter, a harbinger of the land squabbles of the next decades.

"After crossing a range of hills we came into one of the most natural basins we ever saw. It is in the shape of an egg, has a lake in the middle, and is called Laguna Valley. We believe the owner is Senor Penia (sic). If there is a place on the continent of America which could be fitted up as a 'deep vale shut out by Alpine hills from the rude world,' Laguna Valley is that place. As at present managed, it is a long, narrow neck of land surrounded by high hills, with a beautiful lake in the middle, around which are hundreds of young horses and cattle. The houses of the grantees are surrounded by

sufficient trees to give them a romantic appearance. The residence of a single squatter was all we noticed in the valley.”

From Lagoon Valley, they moved on to finally enter the small village of Vacaville. Once again, their writing rhapsodizes on about the pastoral, idyllic qualities of the landscape. In the two years since the Masons had arrived, a number of other immigrants had settled in the area.

“Rounding as it were a corner in the enclosure of hills, we left the Laguna for Vaca Valley. Like Moore, with the wood chopper, we thought that if peace was to be found upon earth it was within that quiet and romantic valley, apparently shut out from the world and its cares. Thriving farms are on both sides of the road clear up into the village of Vacaville, where a cluster of houses are collected - enough, no doubt, for the present wants of its citizens. Beyond, as well as above and below the town appears to be well settled up, and the whole country has the aspect of quiet composure. For our own part of quiet repose, if we were prepared to give up the warfare of life, and desired to retire to a place of quiet repose, we should select Vaca Valley, as its climate and inclosure (sic) seem to indicate its being an inner chamber from whence the turbulent elements of the Bay and the boisterous passions of man are shut off.”

One could only wish that their description of Vacaville had been as expansive as that of Suisun City. After all, we know that Edgar F. Gillespie opened the town’s first merchandise store in 1854. He also served as the Wells Fargo agent and as the local postmaster. Professor Anderson taught local students at the Ulatis Academy and, according to Alta California (1858), “the village itself is fast increasing in permanent improvement. It contains one (too small) public house. A fine brick hotel is being built (under the direction of Patton, architect of Sacramento, by McCarty, contractor) by Wilson. There is a billiard room with two good tables, a Post Office, and several stores.”

It may not have impressed the two reporters enough to be mentioned. According to them, “having seen all that we wanted in this happy valley, we retraced our course, passing through the Laguna over the hills and into Suisun valley once more, where the wind continued its usual pranks. The good horses driven by Mr. Owens, himself, soon brought us to Suisun City, where we had to leave him, and taking the stage for the city, returned with Mr. Cutler to the classic shades of Benicia.”

Mr. Cutler operated a daily line of stages, carrying passengers and light freight, between Vacaville and Suisun. By 1866, his stage coaches left Vacaville at 6 a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday, reaching Suisun in time to connect with the steamer to San Francisco. The stage coach on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday left at noon, promising to reach Suisun in time to connect to Cutler’s stagecoaches for Benicia.

Return trips left Suisun on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 2 p.m., and on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday after the arrival of the steamer from San Francisco.

The fare for each trip was \$1, and the advertising promised that “express business, entrusted to the Driver, will be attended to with promptness and fidelity.”

One hopes that the two reporters had a safe and timely trip home to Benicia to file their report on the development in upper Solano County.

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