

How little Dickson became Dixon

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Dixon is one of the newest towns in Solano County. Its official founding date is 1868. Years earlier, in 1853, 53-year old Thomas Dickson arrived in the area from Iowa, accompanied by livestock, three wagons, five children and his pregnant wife.

Like Vacaville's pioneer settler Mason Wilson, he was impressed by the height of the wild oats growing in the area where Dixon is situated today, and decided to settle there.

During the next few years, several other families settled in the area. The next largest settlement was the town of Silveyville.

Nothing much changed until the arrival of the California Pacific Railroad in 1868. By mid-April, the railroad had reached the newly formed Vaca Station (which quickly developed as the area's economic center, transforming into the Elmira Township in 1871), and soon thereafter came to Dickson's prosperous ranch.

Recognizing the possibilities the railroad would offer, Thomas Dickson donated 10 acres of land for the purposes of a depot and a townsite. The railroad superintendent in turn decided to call this new station "Dickson." W. R. Ferguson, who had purchased one acre of land from Dickson, built a stone house on the land and opened a store on July 7, 1868. A hotel quickly followed, built by Bernard Greinburg and called "Empire."

The town's name, Dickson, quickly changed. According to Wood & Alley's History of Solano County, 1879, the first shipment of goods arriving by train was addressed to "W.R. Ferguson, Dixon" and the town's name has been spelled that way ever since.

Dixon's population numbers quickly rose, as the residents of Silveyville began to move to the prospering new town.

During the next few years, the road between the two settlements was filled with wagons full of household goods. Whole houses, even the Methodist Church, were moved on log rollers, pulled by 40-horse teams. The Solano Democrat wrote on Sept. 3, 1870: "Silveyville ... can scarcely survive if houses continue to be moved much longer at the present rate."

From thereon, Dixon flourished. More and more farmers arrived, many of them of

German descent. Unlike the Vacaville area, orchards did not flourish here. Instead, Dixon concentrated on the grain industry, which remained the major crop until the advent of irrigation.

Underneath the area runs the so-called Dixon Ridge, an alluvial deposit of silty clay loam, underlain by layers of water-bearing gravel. At the beginning of the 20th century, the farmers of Dixon were finally able to pump water for their farms. With the now plentiful supply of water, agriculture could explore new venues. Cattle and alfalfa entered the scene.

Pretty soon, Dixon was labeled "Dairy City."

Sunset Magazine wrote around 1914: "Dixon is known as the Dairy City. It is a title well earned. The prime essentials to successful dairy farming are good feed, pure water, temperate climate and clean surroundings. All of these Dixon enjoys in abundance."

One of the many dairies established was the Timm Certified Dairy. Run by Henry R. Timm, the dairy started in 1910 and soon expanded to more than 300 cows. Its early advertisement "the world's largest certified dairy," painted on the roof of the barn, was a familiar landmark for passengers on the road and on the passing trains.

In the early days of the milk farms, certification implied that each cow was free of tuberculosis and that strict sterilization procedures were applied to the milk. The invention of pasteurization during the 1920s made certification unnecessary.

During the same time, Portuguese milkers arrived from the Azores. Many brought their families with them and purchased their own dairies. By the 1920s, more than 30 dairies operated around Dixon.

During later years, the Gill family owned the largest dairy with around 500 cows. Owner Roy Gill preferred hand-milking to the operation of milking-machines, and the dairy provided bunkhouses for all the men needed to do the job. At one time, the Gill Dairy provided one fifth of all the milk sold in San Francisco. Dixon milk was shipped, first by train, to San Francisco, Oakland and other Bay Area cities as well as to Sacramento and to the local towns. In the mid-1920s, the Gill family designed a refrigerated truck to haul their milk directly from the farm, without having to rely on the train schedules.

Local creameries sprang up to process the milk supply. Dixon had its own, the Dixon Creamery on West A street, while the Vaca Valley Creamery served Vacaville customers from the 1930s on.

Being labeled the "Dairy City," it was only natural for another landmark to be added to

the major highway passing Dixon. This was the Milk Farm Restaurant with its endearing neon sign.

Today, less than a handful of dairies in the area are still operating, though their combined milk output is as large as that produced so many years ago.

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