

First Rio Vista vanished on crest of new year

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Winter storms and flooding have been part of local history since early settlers began to record the weather. The new year of 2006 will be remembered as one such moment in time during which severe rain and flooding created havoc for many county residents.

One of the most severe floods in Solano County history occurred around the New Year's weekend of 1861-1862, impacting the eastern part of the county, especially Rio Vista.

Our story begins several years earlier.

In 1844, Gen. John Bidwell received the Los Ulpinos land grant from Gov. Manuel Micheltorena. The grant was situated in the most easterly part of Solano County.

A nearby area was called Hale Che Muk by native Patwin Indians, roughly translated as "Nothing To Eat," denoting an area without many food resources.

On Dec. 3, 1855, Col. Nathan H. Davis purchased six parcels of land - parts of the upper end of General John Bidwell's Los Ulpinos land grant - which were for sale that day. The lots were located near the junction of Cache Slough and the Sacramento River.

It took Col. Davis, an enterprising rancher, until 1857 before he began to lay out a town plat on part of this land. He situated the plat roughly one mile below Cache Slough. With its location near three water arms (Cache Slough, Steamboat Slough and the Sacramento), the colonel decided to call his new settlement Brazos Del Rio (Arms of the River).

Typical of the times, John Bidwell's original boundaries were only loosely defined. A government surveyor had to be brought in in 1858 to settle various boundary disputes.

Col. Davis' house was the first building of the new settlement, followed by a store building which was moved from Sidwell's landing. A. G. Westgate operated a mercantile store in it.

Other businesses followed quickly: A. J. Bryant's butcher-shop; a hotel operated by the Freeman Brothers; another hotel owned by W. K. Squires; Simon Fahlman's

blacksmith-shop; a tin-shop operated by Robert Carter and his son, Robert C. Jr.; S. K. Perry's store; a drugstore operated by the Freeman Brothers; another drugstore owned by Charles. A. Kirkpatrick; and James Hammell's livery stable.

Businesses and private residences quickly formed a small village.

It being located along the Sacramento River, accessing the waterway was the next logical step. In 1858, Col. Davis commissioned John Sidwell with the construction of a wharf, 24 feet wide and 75 feet long.

With the wharf in place, the steamers connecting to Sacramento, Benicia and San Francisco now also could stop daily at Brazos Del Rio. Steamers included the Senator, the Antelope, the Eclipse, and the mail-carrying New World. Not surprisingly, the enterprising Col. Davis also petitioned for the installation of a post office in 1858. John Sidwell was the first postmaster, to be replaced on Aug. 18, 1858, by Charles A. Kirkpatrick.

That same year, Brazos Del Rio was rechristened Vista del Rio (View Of The River), which quickly became Rio Vista.

Salmon ran abundant in the Sacramento River. Fishing provided one of the main livelihoods, and hundreds were engaged in the business.

With Rio Vista as the only stopping point for the shipping trade along that stretch of the Sacramento River, thousands of fish were shipped daily to Sacramento and San Francisco markets.

Robert Carter and his son built the first cannery in Rio Vista. The salmon canneries helped to process the abundant fish harvest, bringing further prosperity to the young settlement.

All seemed well, with Rio Vista seemingly poised to grow and expand, when in 1861, nature intervened.

During the last weeks of December that year, fierce rains and strong winds led to rapidly rising waters in the river, threatening the settlement of Rio Vista in the days after Christmas.

The waters washed away several houses before they receded. The roughly 150 residents immediately set out to clean up, but winter's stormy weather was not done.

A decade later, in 1877, Thompson & West's "New Historical Atlas of Solano County"

gave a vivid rendering of the whole incident. "The water in the Sacramento rose to unheard of heights," the narrative went. "During the last days of December, in 1861, the water rose high enough to sweep away all the smaller houses in the town, but it was reserved for the 9th day of January, 1862, to witness the culmination of the fearful catastrophe whereby a whole village was to be swept out of existence, its people escaping with barely their lives."

"On that day the water stood ten feet deep at the foot of Main street, and very nearly that deep all over the town and surrounding counties. For miles in all directions the whole face of the county was covered with a wild waste of waters. A terrible rain-storm prevailed all day, with a gale blowing from the east. The waves ran high, and, beating at the houses, made total wreck of all long before night, leaving the people to get to high lands or other places of safety as best they could.

"They all collected together on the top of a mound not far distant from the site of the lately thriving village. They brought a few things with them, and managed to eke out a few days of the most miserable existence until a steamer came and took them off.

"Those days and nights of misery and privation are perhaps among the hardest the early pioneers were called to undergo."

The survivors had to spend three or four days on the mound before they were finally rescued. Most decided to come back, but to relocate Rio Vista to safer ground. This was their first encounter with the type of winter storms that can happen in the area.

The next time, their settlement would be built at a better location. The old Rio Vista settlement was abandoned.

"All that remains now to mark the site of the old town are a few feet of fast decaying piles that formed a part of the wharf," recounted Thompson & West.

"A few strangers sleep in an unknown grave there; cattle and horses now graze undisturbed where was once the busy mart of trade. Shortly after this, perhaps in the month of March 1862, several of the former residents of Rio Vista began casting about for a more secure place whereupon to pitch their tents, a location above the reach of the raging floods.

"The upper edge of the Montezuma Hills, at the northeast corner of Mr. Joseph Bruning's ranch, presented the most favorable appearance, and negotiations were at once entered into with Mr. Bruning for the establishment of the town of its present site. Accordingly, Mr. Bruning surveyed and recorded the townplat of 'New Rio Vista' in 1862." "

A second rancher, T. J. McWorthy, owned an adjoining property and also was interested in the establishment of the new town. He surveyed and recorded an addition to the town. The division between the two properties runs down the middle of Rio Vista's Main Street. New Rio Vista flourished on both sides of Main Street.

Research for this column came from Thompson & West and from Philip Pezzaglia's newly published book "Rio Vista." Like the other local Arcadia publications, Rio Vista includes about 150 historic photographs, showing the growth of the town. The book is available at the Rio Vista Museum, Vacaville Museum and local bookstores.

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