

Settler's humor helped her cope in pioneer days

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During the early years of the Gold Rush, women were a rare sight, especially in the gold fields, but also in the newly forming settlements. One of the few who braved the hardships of the journey was 28-year-old Luzena Stanley Wilson, who, together with her husband Mason Wilson and her two toddler-aged children, came to Vacaville in the spring of 1851.

We are fortunate to have her memoir of their experiences during their years in Sacramento, Nevada City and of their early years in Vacaville.

The Wilsons were among the earliest Anglo-American settlers in the Vacaville area, preceded only by a few, such as the Spanish families who owned large land grants and cattle herds. The difference in lifestyle between the well-established Vaca and Pena families and these newcomers - who lived a hand-to mouth existence out of their wagon - is vividly described.

Throughout her memoir, one of Luzena's most endearing traits is her confidence in her capacity to achieve what she had set out to do. Unlike many of her contemporaries, who had been taught to depend on others, she was very much aware of the possibilities open to a woman and never hesitated to grasp them.

So, immediately after she had arrived in the Vaca Valley, while her husband was cutting oat grass for hay for the San Francisco market, she opened one of her many hostleries. "I, as before, set up my stove and camp kettle and hung out my sign, printed with a charred fire-brand on a piece of board, 'Wilson's Hotel.'

"The accommodations were, perhaps, scanty, but were hailed with delight by the traveling public, which had heretofore lunched or dined on horseback at full gallop, or lain down supperless to sleep under the wide arch of heaven. The boards from the wagon bed made my table, handy stumps and logs made comfortable chairs, and the guest tethered his horse at the distance of a few yards and retired to the other side of the hay-stack to sleep. The next morning he paid me a dollar for his bed and another for breakfast, touched his sombrero, and with a kind 'good morning' spurred his horse and rode away, feeling he had not paid too dearly for his entertainment. ...

Notwithstanding the lack of modern appliances and conveniences, my hotel had the reputation of being the best on the route from Sacramento to Benicia."

Our knowledge about the early years of Vacaville remains sketchy. We do know that Luzena and Mason Wilson did indeed acquire land, as was reported about 1860, "Mr. Wilson bought a tract of about 700 acres where the road crosses the valley, and on the bank of the creek built an inn." This building, built about 1852 with lumber brought from Benicia, was situated on the corner of today's Main Street and Davis Street.

Neighbors were far and few in those early years and people had to rely on one another. The main concerns were the education of the children and health care. By paying double tuition for each child, the Wilsons and their neighbors managed to find a teacher to start a school for six pupils in a canvas building.

For years to come there weren't enough families settled in the area to support a doctor. The one physician who tried to establish himself failed. To pay for his lodgings, presumably at the Wilson House, he left behind his medicine chest. Thus Luzena Stanley Wilson added the dispensation of medicines to her many skills. "I dealt out blue-mass, calomel, and quinine to patients from far and near; inspected tongues and felt pulses, until I grew so familiar with the business that I almost fancied myself a genuine doctor. I don't think I ever killed anybody, and I am quite sure I cured a good many of my patients."

Within a few years, the town began to grow steadily. Gone were the rough pioneer days, as Luzena remembered with her usual tongue-in-cheek humor: "The redwood shanty has given way to large and well-built homes, furnished with comfort and often luxuries. Instead of the barefooted, rag-covered urchins of early times, who ran wild with the pigs and calves, all along the roads one may see troops of rosy, well-clad children on their way to school.

"The old-time Sabbath amusements of riding bucking mustangs into the saloons, drinking all day at the various bars, running foot-races, playing poker, and finishing the day with a free fight are things of the past.

"The sobering influence of civilization has removed all such exciting but dangerous pastimes as playing scientific games of billiards by firing at the balls with a pistol, taking off the heads of the decanters behind the counter with a quick shot, and making the bar-keeper shiver for his well-curled hair."

Vacaville's community had finally settled down.

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