

A fascinating history north of Rio Vista

By Jerry Bowen

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The pages of California's history are well represented with the name John Bidwell, an early emigrant to California.

Starting as a clerk at Sutter's Fort, he went on to amass a fortune in the gold mines and became a respected politician. He also left his mark on Solano County.

Seeing the potential in owning land before gold was discovered, he became a naturalized citizen of Mexico. In 1844, he applied for and received a land grant in Solano County named "Los Ulpinos." It was 17,726 acres located along the southeastern corner of the county.

Shortly after receiving the land grant, Bidwell and some friends built an adobe house on the land near the mouth of Cache Slough.

A party of emigrants arrived from the East in 1846 and Bidwell, persuaded them to settle on the land near the adobe. As luck would have it, that winter was particularly bitter. The new arrivals suffered from a severe food shortage and began calling their new settlement "Hale-Che-Muk," an Indian expression meaning "nothing to eat." The emigrants left vowing never to return at winter's end.

The Treaty of Guadalupe in 1846, which resulted in California being ceded to the United States, put the legality of all grants in question for several years, including that of Los Ulpinos.

During the court battles to gain title to the land, other settlers began populating the properties, among them Robert E. Beasley, who settled near the mouth of Cache Slough in 1851. He established a ferry between the mainland and Sherman Island. It consisted of a small flat-bottomed boat pulled from one side of the river to the other via a chain suspended from each bank. For the next three years, not many other improvements were made.

In 1854, the U.S. Land Commission approved Bidwell's grant. Bidwell then began selling portions of Los Ulpinos, even though an original obligation of the grant not to sell, rent, etc. may still have been in force. As a result of the sales, the boundaries of the grant had become a jumble of inaccurate property lines. Lawsuits followed and as a result of the litigation, Los Ulpinos was divided into 20 equal parcels and sold on the

courthouse steps.

In 1857 a town plat was surveyed and filed for "Brazos del Rio" (Arms of the River) one mile below the mouth of Cache Slough. Col. Davis had the only house on the site. He constructed a wharf at Brazos del Rio and a town began to flourish.

Buildings sprang up including a large mercantile storehouse, a butcher shop, hotel, blacksmith shop, drug store, general store, livery stable, several homes and a salmon cannery. By 1858 the rapidly growing community had a post office, established by Col. Davis. The hamlet was showing great expectations of permanence.

In 1859, the California Steam Navigation Co. bought Col. Davis' wharf and enlarged it. Steamers "New World," "Antelope," "Eclipse" and "Senator" stopped daily. Salmon became a big industry and canned fish was shipped up and down the Sacramento River and to the San Francisco Bay area.

In 1860 the citizens of Brazos del Rio renamed the growing town, but a disaster was in the making in the not too distant future for this budding community.

It began raining heavily in the latter part of 1861, and it rained and it rained and it rained. The little town began to experience some flooding and a few of the smaller buildings were washed away.

The torrents of rain continued unabated, but the greatest deluge came on Jan. 9, 1862. It was as if the heavens opened a floodgate.

The great flood of 1862 that wiped out nearby Maine Prairie and other towns up and down the Sacramento River Delta struck with the fury of Armageddon.

No one was prepared for the invading waters that covered the town to a depth of 12 feet. Giant waves ripped the homes and businesses from their foundations and flung them into the fury of a river gone mad.

Citizens of the town that were not washed away in the maelstrom of water and screaming wind managed to find their way to the top of a small muddy mound a short distance from town.

For several days the battered and starving flood victims clung to life as the storm raged on for several days.

As the tempest began to abate, steamers that survived the catastrophe began running up and down the river looking for survivors and encountered the stranded group of

forlorn survivors on the mound. One can only imagine the sense of relief they must have felt as the ships brought them aboard.

For miles around, the area resembled a vast inland sea with islands appearing here and there. Everything was gone and for the survivors there were two choices. Find higher ground to rebuild their community or leave the area.

Indeed, several members of the hardy group did resettle on higher ground. They negotiated a deal with rancher, Joseph Bruning, and began to rebuild the town that had once been called "Nothing to eat," then "Brazos del Rio." There's nothing left at the original site to remind us of the original settlement, but a ferry still runs nearby, the ferry to Sherman Island.

By the way, I didn't mention the new name give to Brazos del Rio just before the flood of 1862. It was Rio Vista. No, not the Rio Vista we know today. Today's Rio Vista lies about a mile south of Brazos del Rio. Today's town, located on that higher ground, was first named "New Rio Vista" and over the years became just "Rio Vista."

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