

Wagon train reaches Pleasants Valley

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, we left James and William Pleasants at Bidwell Bar near Marysville in California.

They turned the cattle and faithful oxen loose to graze on the abundant grass in the hills nearby. Unfortunately the local Indians ran all of the cattle off and butchered them, a sad end for the faithful beasts after long months on the trail.

In his book, Pleasants reflected, "On leaving home, it was confidently expected that we would return within eighteen months, at least partially successful. But it is six long years - years of labor and disappointment, of hopes and fears - ere many of us go back. Some remain in California the balance of their lives, and others still of the little band that started forth that lovely May morning, their hearts filled to overflowing with bright, glowing hopes for the future, lie under the silent stars, sleeping the sleep that knows no waking."

Shortly after arriving at Bidwell's Bar, the pioneers were able to send letters home with John Bidwell himself acting as the deliveryman to the post office. Of course communication with the folks back home would be slow and many months would pass before they could expect any news from home.

Just when you would expect the hardships of the trip across the continent should be over, tragedy still dogged the heels of the members of the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train. Shortly after arriving at Bidwell's Bar, Tom Fristo came down with cholera and died within a few hours. His was the fourth death to occur in a family of five that traveled with the wagon train. The only survivor in that family was John Kearns.

With their own supplies exhausted, the shock of the high price of goods in the California gold region soon hit home. True, they were finding some gold while working in overwhelming heat to recover the precious metal, but the cost of food, clothing and shelter was so high that it was hard to make any sort of a profit.

Then along came the rains in October that prevented them from being able to dig for gold and ruined what little foodstuffs they had. Supplies became even scarcer and of course the already high prices zoomed even higher.

Pleasants goes on to say, "During the winter that followed we paid one dollar per

pound for flour that became almost a solid mass, and had to be cut from the barrel and the lumps pounded into a powder before it could be made into bread. Certainly a poor article of diet, but better than no bread at all."

James Pleasants was able to earn some money by assisting others to build cabins. The pay would have been considered high had they been home, but in the gold fields \$10 a day wasn't much to hoot about.

William had not fully recovered from his "mountain fever" as diagnosed by doctors and remained sick all of the rest of 1849 and 1850. He had become very weak from constant diarrhea and could barely walk.

One day while he was at the local supply store he spotted some figs and the store owner let him try them. He had never seen anything like them before, loved the taste and seemed to feel better after eating them for a while. When he told the doctor that was attending to his illness he was told, "You darn fool, go and eat of those figs and you will die before another sun rises."

Well, he didn't die by the next sunrise and he continued to eat them and continued to improve and finally got well. It may be that he was actually suffering from scurvy rather than "mountain fever" and perhaps the doctor was somewhat of a quack.

They managed to find a few rich pockets of gold as time passed and add to their poke somewhat. But the claims they were able to obtain at Bidwell's Bar weren't productive enough for them, so they moved to new digs.

They spent a lot of time turning the stream from its bed in expectation of finding rich deposits, but they found nothing. They were to learn years later that the area, Oregon Bar, later gave up massive gold. It just wasn't their luck of the draw to find any of it.

In November 1850, the Pleasants decided to see more of the country. Boarding a ferry with a pack mule they stepped ashore at the new town of Sacramento. From there they moved on to Davisville - Davis today - and Winters and wandered into a lush valley loaded with wild game; the valley that was to later be named after them as Pleasants Valley.

William described the valley, "The whole country was at that time filled with wild game. Hundreds of elk could be seen in a single herd, and antelope equally numerous, while great flocks of wild geese covered thousands of acres of ground at a time. And I must not forget to mention that royal beast, the monarch of them all, the grizzly bear. This region was his home, and for years after my father had settled this valley he continued to challenge our right to oust him from it."

It was a wilderness completely suited to the tastes of these devoted hunters.

At the time, Vacaville was not yet fully established. The plat map had been drawn up and the sale to Mizner and McDaniel made. The only residents in the area in 1850 were Mrs. McGuire, the Long family, the Vacas and Penas. By 1852, most of Pleasants Valley was under claim and was in the process of being settled. The task of clearing the land and building homes was enormous, but the uncomplaining pioneers were equal to the task.

With aid and advice by one of the earliest settlers, John Wolfskill, they planted orchards that would eventually expand all over the area and for a long time become the famous Vacaville fruit belt.

On Feb. 19, 1856, James sent his son, William, back to Missouri to bring the rest of the family to California. He traveled back in relative comfort on ships and via the Isthmus of Panama Railroad and arrived on April 6 at the Missouri homestead after a 200-mile horseback ride. After six long years he was reunited with his brothers and sisters and their families.

During the trip he finally shed the heavy coat that was his "bank." In it was sewn about \$1,500 in gold coin. By the time he arrived, the coat had become quite a burden to wear and according to William, "... and at last when it was discarded my skin bore for weeks afterward visible impressions of ten and twenty dollar gold pieces."

The money was used to put together a new wagon train outfit to take his three sisters and brother, Thomas Harvey, back to California. It's interesting once again to note that the sisters' names were not recorded in the journal.

For the story of his journey back to California, I'll leave it up to the readers to learn for themselves how and what route he took on the return trip. The book, "Twice Across The Plains" is available at the Vacaville Library and a copy is also located at the Vacaville Heritage Council.

As for James Pleasants, after living in tents and a log cabin, the family built a fine redwood home in 1880, followed by William living on his own plot of land.

William's home is still standing with descendent Ethel Hoskins still living there and in the process of placing it on the historic register.

As for James Pleasants' home, its story is not so pleasant. The home had been abandoned for a time in the 1960s and it wasn't long before unscrupulous individuals began to vandalize the home and steal whatever they could get their hands on.

The Pleasants family was so disheartened by the actions of these human predators that they ordered the house to be burned. The task fell to Vacaville's fire chief, Warren Hughes, and his crew. But just as the family stood solidly against the elements to build their future, the house resisted the fiery destruction.

On May 6, 1969, in an article about the home's demise, The Reporter's Richard Rico declared, "Yet despite the desecration, the old house stood solid early Sunday morning as the day J. M. built it. It was reluctant to burn. The old solid beams were like tempered steel."

In reading pioneer diaries and journals it's easy to see our ancestors were like tempered steel. During tough times they did what was needed to overcome the obstacles and problems that were dealt without whining or complaining. It was just another temporary roadblock in everyday life to be dealt with. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned here.

This concludes the series of articles about the Pleasants family.

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