

Vaca, Pena relationship turns to trouble

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, June 25, 2006

In my last column I ended with a brief discussion of the conditions that the Vacas and Penas lived under in their newly built homes in Lagoon Valley.

In this piece, we will see a little more about the lives of the families during the early years.

Each year, the Vacas and Penas held a rodeo to collect all the cattle on their land for branding and slaughter. They would send word to all the neighbors to attend and they would also gather their own cattle for the same purpose. It was a real community affair and a party always accompanied every rodeo. The Vacas and Penas also attended other rodeos as far away as San Jose and Santa Clara.

The Spanish were known for their excellent horsemanship and that was put to good use when rounding up cattle for slaughter. Mounted men would ride up alongside a selected animal, and with a knife, strike the nerve at the nape of the neck, causing the bull to fall immediately to the ground, already dead. Then followed the "peladores" who removed the hide, stretched it on the ground, flesh side up, and drove sticks in the ends to hold it down. When dry, the hides were stored awaiting shipment.. Hides were a form of currency at the time, worth about \$2 in trade and \$1.50 in silver.

"Tasajeros" cut up the meat, followed by Indian women who gathered the tallow in leather hampers. After cooling somewhat, the tallow was poured into skin "botas." A bota was an ox hide sewn into a bag with rawhide thongs. The neck was left open so the tallow could be poured in. A bota usually contained 20 arrobas. An arroba of tallow weighed about 25 pounds and was worth \$2.

In hot weather, the meat was cut into strips and hung out to dry in the sun, turning it into jerky. At other times the meat was pickled. Any remaining parts of the animal were left in the field for birds and wild animals to dispose of.

Helen Dermody Crystal in her 1916 University of California Masters Thesis told a story about the dangers of life in the area at the time. "Two little girls wanted to go for a walk by themselves on the Los Putos rancho. As it was not safe for the two little girls to walk by themselves, Senora Anastasia (Vaca) Pena went with them. One of the girls was her daughter, Appolonia Pena, the other was her niece, Nestora Pena.

“As they were breaking their way through the tall wild oats of their rancho, one of the children cried out in Spanish, ‘Oh, look at the big pig!’ Senora looked just once, seized each little girl by the hand, and literally flew toward home, for the animal that was coming toward them was not a domestic pig, but a wild bear. However, all three lived to tell the tale, but the bear, or one of his relatives, was killed soon after by one of the Pena boys.”

Helen tells of another interesting story of the Penas that is related to the gold rush. “... gold nuggets circulated so freely on the Rancho Los Putos that the children often played games with them.” Senora Maria Delores Vaca Pena, who married John Patton Lyon, had two chains of nuggets that were given to her when she was a small child made into a necklace.

Marriage between the Vacas and Penas and other nearby settlers of Solano County was always a major affair. When the daughter of Juan Manual Vaca, Maria Anastasia Vaca, and Juan Felipe Pena’s son, Jesus Pena, were married, the ceremonies were held at the Mission in Sonoma. Invitations went out all over California for the affair. Those in attendance included the Picos from San Diego and Mariano G. Vallejo and his wife, as well as many of the other prominent Spanish settlers from Santa Rosa, Martinez and Los Angeles.

In all, more than a hundred guests attended the wedding. After the ceremonies, everyone rode all the way to the Vaca rancho for the party that undoubtedly lasted several days.

The Vaca and Pena clans began to grow in number. In 1845, Vaca, whose first wife died in New Mexico, added to his household when he married Estefano Martinez and had one child.

The early Spanish were well-known for their hospitality to strangers that was a must for individuals that were traveling long distances. When a traveler set out on a trip that would take more than one day they would stop overnight at the missions or another rancho, whichever was closest. The hospitality left nothing to be desired. If they needed money, fresh horses, food or lodging, it was provided at no cost.

For a while it was a fairly idyllic life for the times, but trouble was brewing for the pioneers. To start with, a dispute as to the size and boundaries of the Vaca and Pena land grant named Lihuaytos reared its ugly head. The latter was due to encroachment upon the neighboring grant owned by Wolfskill (Rancho Rio De Los Putos), which brought much ill feeling and the requirement for a re-definition of the grant boundaries. This encroachment typifies the frequent disregard for the admittedly vague boundaries of the large land grants of the time. It wasn’t until later that a survey was made and the

Vaca/Pena land grant was proper and then renamed Rancho Los Putos.

Slowly but surely, in spite of family ties by marriage, ill feelings between the two families began to emerge.

On Aug. 21, 1850, Juan Manual Vaca deeded nine square miles of land (5,769 acres) to William McDaniel with a promise that a new town, one mile square (640 acres) would be established and named after Vaca. In return, Vaca received \$3,000 and 1,044 lots in town. It might be noted that McDaniel was a federal land agent and it was against the laws of the land for him to be involved in purchasing land. Pena was furious. According to Maria Delores Vaca Pena, granddaughter of a Vaca-Pena union, it was the cause of the major quarrel between the two. In response, Vaca deeded to "compadre" Pena a share of land equal to the nine square miles that eventually were sold by Pena or passed on to his heirs. Apparently, this did little to appease Pena. It might be presumed the dispute had more to do with the town being named after Vaca, with the Pena name being left out.

Vaca also had problems with the McDaniel deal. He said he had believed he was signing over only one square mile. Being illiterate, he had been at the mercy of an interpreter when he placed his "x" on the deed. California became a state and with it came taxes.

To add to their troubles, disputes with squatters, land buyers and between the two families that required expensive lawyers were settled by selling or giving parcels of land from the grant to the lawyers and winners of the lawsuits.

A good example of this is when, in May 1851, Vaca printed in the California Gazette, the newspaper in Benicia, a complaint that read: "Caution. I hereby notify all persons not to purchase any lands from William McDaniel, which he claims to have purchased from me under a title, which he obtained from me under false pretenses, and I shall institute suit against him to annul the title so fraudulently obtained by him.—Manual Baca."

In many records "Vaca" is recorded as "Baca."

McDaniel sued Vaca for libel and the loss of a \$50,000 land sale. The case was in court by October 1851. The jury found Vaca guilty of libel the following day and fined him \$16,500.

The decision was appealed to the State Supreme Court, which ruled that Vaca's newspaper warning was something that "every freeman and freeholder would be justified in making if the circumstances raised a strong presumption that the fraud had

been attempted upon him to get possession of his estate.”

The high court decided that the original judgment should be reversed and that a new trial, at McDaniel’s expense, should proceed.

By 1850 a census showed only 12 Vacas in the immediate area. The clan was beginning to disperse as, bit by bit, the land grant of Los Putos was being reduced in size and, perhaps, because of the feud.

I’ll continue the saga of the Pena Adobe in my next article.

* * * *

Perhaps some of you will be interested in joining with the members of the “Friends of the Pena Adobe.” The goal of the “Friends” is to continue the restoration of the historic structure and associated museum, fund-raising, and to reopen the Adobe with a docent on a regular basis to the public. Programs that will interest school children to learn the history and heritage of the Indian and Spanish eras as well as native plants and their uses are also in the works. If you think you might like to join this happy crew of dedicated volunteers you can call Beverly Morlock. Nature-Environmental Education Program Specialist, City of Vacaville, Community Services Department, 707-469-6674, or e-mail her at bmorlock@cityofvacaville.com. Also, if you are in the area of the Old Town Hall on Thursdays from 9 a.m.-1 p.m., drop by the Vacaville Heritage Council on the bottom floor for info.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/317>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/317/>