

Vaca, Pena rift impacts both families

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last article we saw a rift grow between the Vacas and Penas. As a result, several members of the Vaca clan migrated from the Vacaville area, mainly toward the northern reaches of the grant, which today is Davis. By the 1850s, there were only 12 Vacas in the immediate area.

More and more disenchanted gold miners began settling into Vacaville and the surrounding areas. California became a state, and with it, new rules, taxes and problems with squatters who settled on the land grant.

In 1851, California enacted the Land Act to verify Spanish and Mexican land grants. Expensive litigation resulted in large portions of the Rancho Los Puntos either sold or transferred to lawyers to pay for their services.

Manual Vaca's wife, Estefano, left him in 1852, taking with her the 30 head of cattle she had come into the marriage with, as well as an agreed increase in the original herd.

Vaca was to encounter more problems. In the same year, the feud between Pena and Vaca became even more serious and while the former friends maintained one lawyer jointly, they hired separate lawyers in their continued quest to have the land recognized as legally theirs.

The legal fees for the years 1843 through 1858 had taken their toll when they finally received an official United States patent.

To settle their taxes, they turned large parcels over to the tax collectors of the day. Land also was sold to buy provisions and pay lawyers fees.

The Vacas were land-rich, money-poor and perhaps not the best managers of their resources. The feud must have been bitter fruit indeed as these old friends shared family ties. By 1855, the tax rolls show only 13,777 acres of the original 44,384 acres remaining from the Vaca/Pena grant in the original owners' hands.

Juan Felipe Pena died March 15, 1863, leaving the adobe to his only daughter, Nestora. Pena's wife, Isabella, stayed at the adobe until her death in 1884. Nestora married Jesus Rivera and they also lived in the adobe.

Juan Felipe Pena's death is a story in itself. Tradition has it that he was ex-communicated by a Catholic priest for reading "unauthorized" books. He would not "repent" and was denied last rites and burial in hallowed ground.

For a long time, his burial place was relatively unknown to members outside the family. He was laid to rest in the Catholic section of the Benicia cemetery on a knoll overlooking the city and the Sacramento River.

How he ended up in the Catholic section of the cemetery is still a mystery to me. Perhaps one of the readers of this column knows the facts. Over the years, the earthquake of 1892 and vandalism had taken a toll on Pena's headstone.

In 1997, a Green Valley pioneer descendent, Robert R. Smith, documented the condition of the Pena family plot at the cemetery. Since then, Juan Felipe Pena's tombstone, as well as many others, has been repaired and concerned citizens of Benicia have renovated the entire cemetery.

In the course of this time, the adobe was remodeled at least three times. In the 1840s or early 1850s the tule-thatched roof was replaced with hand-split shakes. In the 1880s, the home was enlarged and "modernized" by Jesus Rivera and his wife, Nestora. This included having the entire building encased in wood. The frame of the inside walls was improved with plastering and porches around the house were enclosed to form four additional rooms for the growing family. The additional rooms, however, did not have doors into the main house. While the main house was heated with terra cotta charcoal burners, these additional rooms, being cut off from the main house, were heated with wood-burning stoves.

Juan Felipe Pena had deeded much of his land to his children as soon as his claim was declared valid in 1858. Nestora received about 1,000 acres and the adobe ranch house. At age three, Nestora had made the long journey from New Mexico with her parents in 1841. Nestora and an infant cousin, Appalonia Vaca, sometimes rode in saddle bags balanced across the back of a gentle mule.

Nestora cared for her mother, Isabella at the adobe home until the latter's death in 1885. Nestora married Jesus Tapia Rivera in 1881. The Riveras had no children. A niece, Maria Dolores Pena, later married to John P. Lyon, had lived with Nestora.

In 1918, Nestora deeded much of her land and the old adobe to Maria. To her nephew, Vidal Pena, who had for many years managed the ranch, she deeded 100 acres. Nestora died in 1922 at the age of 83 or 84.

Juan Felipe Pena's granddaughter, Rose Frances Pena, wrote an account about life at

the Pena adobe. She was born Oct. 22, 1881, daughter of Juan Felipe Pena's son, Juan Antonio Pena, in a frame home built a short distance from her grandparents' adobe.

Rose Frances Pena wrote:

"The original adobe consisted of a main or center room and two bedrooms. The main room was furnished with a large round center pedestal table, covered with a shawl on which were kept the family Bible, two photo albums and other religious books.

There was a sofa and several chairs, most of them upholstered in velvet. A small marble top table was by the window and an organ in one corner. A secretary desk and bookcase contained many books in Spanish and English. A very pretty carpet lay on the floor. There were no drapes, but cornices made of seashells from which hung nice lace curtains. On the south wall hung large pictures of Juan Pena, his wife and Nestora.

The bedrooms were very plain, each containing a double bed, washstand and bureau. Porches enclosed the front of all rooms and grapevines shaded the buildings. The Indian women servants slept upstairs in the attic rooms.

There was no kitchen in the adobe; meals were prepared in an outdoor bake oven and kettles and caldrons were placed on rocks over an open fire. In addition to preparing meals, the caldrons were also used to boil water for laundry, and other household uses. The well with a hand pump was located on the east side almost facing the door of the center room, about 15 or 20 feet away.

About 1880, the adobe was modernized and enlarged by encasing the entire building in wood sheathing and frame extensions. A frame annex was added to the north end of the building where kitchen facilities were installed.

The garden (100 x 200) had statues and a croquet ground; there was a patio with chairs. Black Mission grapes brought from Santa Barbara Mission grew on the arbors, there was no grass but the yard was sprinkled each morning. A local merchant, Mr. Blum, brought them two Cedar of Lebanon trees which he obtained on a trip to Jerusalem and they were planted on the west side of the adobe, there was also a cork tree. The flower garden had tea rose bushes, tulips, pink Castilian roses, hollyhocks, verbena, china lilies, Bird of Paradise, mock orange, lilacs and lots of bulbs.

"Mr. Wolfskill brought trees for the family orchard that had a variety of citrus, nuts, pomegranates, quince, pears, olives and figs. Two Spanish apricot trees were planted with seeds brought from Spain. I later planted four walnut trees on the west side of the adobe that were brought here by Wiley S. Killingsworth."

In the 1860s, a vegetable garden was planted near the creek.

Squash, pumpkin lentils, garbanzos, watermelon and muskmelon were planted with seeds they brought from Los Angeles.

“When the family first occupied the adobe, tight fences were erected around all the buildings to protect the children and animals from the wildlife that roamed the valley. After they had lived there for a while and had acquired several dogs they were no longer bothered by the wild animals, so just ordinary fences were enough.”

Rose Pena and her neighbor, Edwin Markham, attended Black School in Lagoon Valley, She commented, “My dresses lasted forever, because they were seldom worn.”

She enjoyed horseback riding and also riding her bicycle. Rose later graduated from a boarding school in Benicia and traveled to Alaska to visit her sister. She taught school there for a year before returning to marry Leonard Coombs. She then went on to teach English and Spanish in Richmond.

I'll continue the account of the Pena Adobe in my next article.

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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, fundraising, and to reopen the adobe with a docent on a regular basis to the public. Programs that will interest schoolchildren 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, 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. to 1 p.m., drop by the Vacaville Heritage Council on the bottom floor for more information.

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