

The Vacas and Pena Land Holdings

By Jerry Bowen

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In the last installment we saw the relationship between the Vacas and Penas begin to fall apart even as marriage between their sons and daughters took place over the years.

In 1847, Americans Albert Lyon, John Patton Sr. and Jr., along with J.P. Willis and Clay Long, arrived in the Vaca Valley. In April of 1849, Vaca decided to sell a half-league of land between Alamo and Ulatis creeks for \$8,000 to Albert Lyon and the Pattons.

On Aug. 21, 1850, Vaca deeded 9 square miles to another new arrival, William McDaniel, for \$3,000 to establish the town of Vacaville. Part of the deal was that McDaniel was to establish 1,055 lots.

Under the new Republic of California, nothing changed as far as landownership, but when California went for statehood in 1850, as the thirty-ninth state, the Mexican land grants landed in the courts. Rancho owners were forced to engage in protracted and costly legal battles in an effort to gain confirmation of their claims.

Juan Manual Vaca died May 15, 1856 at age 73 or 74. His request was not to be buried on the land grant. For a long time historians have said that family tradition has the patron's final resting place in the family plot that was part of the Thomas Foster Ranch. This was part of the Los Putos rancho, just northwest of Tremont Station. This would have him interred possibly under Interstate 80 at the far end of Dixon, at the Kidwell exit.

However, if you read Helen Dermody Crystal's 1933 University of California Masters Thesis, we find the following: Manual Vaca died April 15, 1856 at the age of seventy years. He is buried in the Catholic Cemetery in the city of Sacramento. In a footnote she states Maria Delores Vaca Pena Lyon provided this information.

Juan Felipe Pena had deeded much of his land to his children as soon as his claim was declared valid in 1858. Daughter Nestora received about 1000 acres and the adobe ranch house. He died in 1861 and was buried in the Catholic Cemetery in Benicia.

Nestora continued to live in the Pena Adobe with Maria Dolores Pena until 1918 when she left the adobe to live the rest of her days in Vacaville in a house that Juan Manual Vaca had built in 1854, one of the earliest dwellings in the new town of Vacaville. It was

located in today's parking lot at the end of Dobbins Street in behind the Hub Barber Shop.

Maria Dolores Vaca Pena Lyon continued to live in the adobe until about 1920. Maria deeded the adobe to her children in 1947.

By the 1930s only 212 acres of the original 44,383-acre rancho was all that was still held by the heirs of Vaca and Pena. Vidal Pena owned 55 acres; Fred Pena owned five acres and Salvador Pena held about 50 acres. Maria Delores Pena Lyon owned 100 acres that included the Pena Adobe. Nestora Lyon owned two acres in Vacaville that included the old Vaca frame house as well as a very successful restaurant opened by the Pena ladies on Merchant Street across the street from the Triangle building in 1922 naming it "Casa Maria". It was located next to the building that has the Eagle Eye Engraving business today and probably extended all the way to the entrance of today's parking lot at the end of Dobbins Street.

In 1950 modern Fiesta Days began with the celebration of the city's centennial. The three-day festivities included a "historical pageant" with more than 200 participants re-enacting "main eras of what is known of Vaca Valley, from the wilderness, to the Indian and Spanish, to the cowboys, to the new eras."

By the 1950s the adobe stood as an abandoned ruin in a meadow overgrown with weeds and neglected trees and shrubbery. The old adobe walls, for so many years protected by the encasing wood siding, became exposed and the south wall collapsed.

Attention was finally being paid to the crumbling adobe when Vacaville Parlor 293 of Native Daughters of the Golden West erected a plaque at the adobe listing the structure as a historic monument September 16, 1955.

In 1956 the Solano County Historical Society was begun when an organizational meeting under the direction of Miss Ivy Loeber of St. Helena, president of the Napa County Historical Society and a regional vice president of the Conference of California Societies, was held at the old County Library in Fairfield. Thirty volunteers from all over the county appeared with Benicia furnishing the largest contingent. Officers were elected with Harry Rowe, county librarian as president;

The Pena family sold the adobe in 1957 to Solano County Supervisors Delbert Mowers and William Goheen. Mowers and Goheen then deeded it along with one and a half acres to the Solano County Historical Society in 1959. The president of the historical society at the time, Robert Power of Nut Tree fame, headed a committee that had preliminary development plans and an outline of a scheme to finance the project. The adobe was in bad shape and the Sons of the Golden West, Parlor 39 of Suisun,

installed a plastic tarp over the building to keep out the rain, paid for with a contribution by the Napa-Solano chapter of the Cow Belles. The entire county of Solano had come alive with more and more volunteer organizations becoming involved with the preservation of this important historic monument to our pioneering families.

Title was turned over to the city of Vacaville in 1961. The California Medical Facility tentatively agreed to use inmates to work on the project.

A drive for funds got off to a good start when three service clubs in the Vacaville area - Lions, Rotary and Soroptimists unanimously endorsed the project and agreed to underwrite a substantial part of the drive. Plans were in the works to solicit funds from other parts of Solano County.

In late 1962, the editor of The Reporter in Vacaville, Bill Harris, discovered that new construction of Highway 40 was going to destroy the pioneer Pena/Vaca cemetery on Steinmetz Hill in the triangle formed by today's Interstate 80, Cherry Glen Road and Lyon Road. Representatives of the society, The Reporter, the Division of Highways and a member of the Pena family met on site to discuss solutions to the problem. Several alternatives were discussed, including relocating the cemetery or redesigning the freeway.

Agreement was reached to relocate the graves. In all, 16 graves were removed and relocated to a small hill behind the Pena Adobe, overlooking Lagoon Valley.

About 70 inmates from the California Medical Facility were employed and the Pena Adobe restoration work was begun. The restoration was completed in 1965. The only bit of construction not restored to the original was the tule-thatch roof.

As a final fitting touch, after the restoration Rose Pena Coombs donated an odd three-cornered chair, which was replaced in its original location. Sitting in that chair on a visit to the Adobe in 1972, Rose recalled how she had sat in the same chair almost ninety years earlier as punishment for a childish misdeed when she was about three years old.

For several years, local historian, Rodney Rulofson, served without pay as a curator of the restored Pena Adobe and the nearby Mowers-Goheen Museum. He lived on site and made himself available to organizations and schools for tours, education and continued maintenance of the adobe and the surrounding grounds. After his death in 1975 two more curators served for a while but then there were none. Vandalism increased and the adobe gradually fell once again into disrepair and neglect.

In 2004, Vacaville Heritage Council president, Robert Allen, contacted Mayor Len

Augustine who along with the Vacaville city manager and parks and recreation managers met to discuss the situation. To their credit our city officials sprang into action and obtained a grant to renew the adobe to its former glory. The restoration is now in progress.

Vacaville Community Services Director, Don Shatzel, formed the Friends of the Adobe to preserve the history of the Pena Adobe and provide educational and cultural services to the community in 2005. He has since moved on but the Friends of the Adobe continues under the able leadership of Beverly Morlock, Vacaville's Nature-Environmental Education Program Specialist who currently presides over the committee. Since then a reunion of the dependents of the Vaca, Pena, Armijo and Berryessa families, organized by Pena descendant Richard Lyons and the city, was held with about 250 descendents attending. The Friends of the Adobe held a "Fandango" this year as a successful fundraiser at the adobe and has plans to hold another next year along with the reunion of the families at the same time. Many lessons were learned from the first fandango that will make the next fandango an event that will long be remembered.

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