

Rush family helped agriculture thrive in local area

By Jerry Bowen

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I've often been asked why I think that knowing something about the past is important. Today, most of us don't even think about the fact that all the mistakes and the good decisions made by those who came before us have had a profound effect on our lives.

With that said, let's look into the lives of the Rush family a little to see what they have passed down to us.

In the early 1800s, Hiram Rush's paternal grandparents moved from Pennsylvania to Ohio. Later they settled in South Bend, Ind., where their son Hiram received his education.

The Rush and the Inwood families were closely tied by marriage. Richard Inwood married Catherine Rush and Hiram Rush married Richard's sister, Ann Inwood, in 1835. Hiram and Ann had two children, Eleanor in 1837 and Sarah in 1842. When Ann died, Hiram married Ann's sister, Sarah Eade Inwood, on Jan.18, 1849.

For a time, Hiram was employed as a clerk, but not being satisfied with the local outlook for individual advancement, he began to look to the Far West in 1849 with an eye to a better future.

He decided to purchase a small herd of cattle, and the family started across the plains and mountains lying between him and the Golden West.

As we shall see, his objective was more than just to head to the gold mines to make his fortune. Even as a young man, he must have been a man of good character and force, for he was chosen captain of the wagon train that he traveled with. Under his direction, the long journey was accomplished without loss of life, cattle and possessions, and on reaching the Sacramento Valley, he and his family decided to go no farther, the rest of the company going on to other locations.

After turning the cattle loose into the lush grass of the area, Rush decided the hotel business would be a good choice and he established what was known as the Fourteen-Mile House in today's Elk Grove area. It quickly became a popular and well-patronized stopping place for travelers on their way into the state.

Meanwhile, the herd of cattle Hiram brought with him grew substantially larger and he

found it necessary to turn the operation of the hotel over to Mrs. Rush. This was another good decision because both operations proved to be highly successful. On Oct. 12, 1852. Hiram and Sarah's first child, Benjamin Franklin Rush, was born.

Nearby Sacramento had been devastated by a fire and then a flood in 1852, both of which had an effect on the surrounding area. So, Hiram had to make another important decision whether or not to remain where they were.

Hiram and Sarah chose to seek a more healthful location, and they relocated to Solano County. They settled in the Potrero Hills, in the southwestern part of the county, where there was fine range for the cattle. In the following year they moved to Suisun, which became the family home for many years.

In the years following the move to Solano County, Hiram Rush's level-headed business decisions were highly successful and soon he became recognized as one of the wealthiest and most influential men in Solano County.

His cattle increased to about 3,000 head, in addition to which he had several hundred head of horses. His land holdings amounted to 51,000 acres. Along with the acreage in the Suisun Valley, the town of Suisun and the Potrero Hills, some of the land was in Monterey County. In 1856 Hiram built the three-story Mason's building in Suisun.

Then, in 1865, the Rush family established a comfortable home in San Francisco in order to give the children better educational advantages.

Tragedy struck on Oct. 4, 1869, when 60-year-old Hiram Rush was crossing a stream in a buggy. He was killed when he apparently was ejected from the buggy he was driving.

Rush had disposed of much of his property prior to his death and Sarah managed the remaining properties and businesses until her death in 1906.

Hiram's son, Benjamin, attended the public schools of Oakland, followed by the Oakland Military Academy, and rounded out his education by taking a course in Heald's Business College in San Francisco. His first employment was as a bookkeeper for the firm of Titcomb & Williams, where he remained about five years, at the end of which time he resigned in order to take charge of his father's estate.

During the subsequent years, Benjamin carried on and extended the operations that his father had established and was eminently successful in all his operations. He also became highly interested in the breeding and raising of harness horses and again was very successful.

In 1876 Benjamin Rush married Anna McKean, who had been born on the Oregon Trail and reared in Astoria, Ore. They had seven children: Richard Ira, Frederick Winn, Eleanor, Mary Charlotte, Benjamin Franklin, Hiram Stewart and Annabelle.

For a while he managed the Solano County Republican, one of the county's leading newspapers at the time, and was a director of the Solano County Bank along with other financial interests.

In 1882 he held his first public office when he was appointed a trustee of the Crystal school district in Suisun Township. In 1894 he was elected sheriff of Solano County, serving until 1899.

In 1906 he was elected to the state Senate and served six terms. He was a member of the special committee for selecting a location for the state agricultural farm, a tract of nearly 800 acres at Davisville - today's Davis - for the agricultural department of the State University.

He served many times as chairman of the Senate committee on agriculture; as chairman of the committee on hospitals and asylums; was active in securing the necessary appropriation for the state hospital at Napa and the Veterans' Home at Yountville; was a member of the committees on finance, agriculture and dairying, drainage, swamp and overflow lands, mining and oil industries, fruit and vine interests, and roads and highways.

Benjamin Rush was the first president of the Solano County Agricultural Society and for many years was a member of the State Agricultural Society; serving six years as president, during which period he was ex officio regent of the state university.

For many years he was active in the Masonic order and a member of Islam Temple, Nobles of the Mystic Shrine in San Francisco, and of the Knights of Pythias.

Benjamin F. Rush died in Suisun City in October 1940 at the age of 88, followed by his wife, Anna, at the age of 90 in 1943.

Today, due to wise decisions made over the many years, we are able to enjoy a wonderful look into the past at the original Rush Ranch in the Potrero Hills.

During the grand opening of the Rush Ranch, Benjamin and Anna's great grandson Thomas N. Rush later wrote of the ceremony:

"I once knew a grizzled old rancher well into his 80s, who planted a tree at the corner of his ranch house so as to catch the rain runoff from the roof. I asked him; why at his

age was he planting trees? He would be gone before it matured. He told me that when he left earth, he wanted to leave it a little better for someone else.

"This philosophy applies to a very high percentage of ranchers in this country. Granted, some are users and use the land in a non-responsible way by overgrazing it. They are few and far between. These people are the low minority and soon go out of business, as their livestock cannot make sufficient gains to obtain a profit when they market them. They 'milked' the land. It is to the ranchers' credit that very high percentages are excellent stewards of the land having learned from their forefathers before them. Some of the young ones of today, (if there are any) learn good management and animal husbandry in accredited agriculture schools and practice it faithfully. It is only common sense that if they strayed from this course they too, would be out of business.

"In 1991 at the grand opening of the Rush Ranch, an older gentleman and his wife attended. They were in their early 70s and were sitting on a bale of hay listening to a young man give a speech to a gathering of attentive guests about the evils of overgrazing and raping the land. Pointing his arm toward some cattle in the distance, the young man condemned the ranchers that allowed overgrazing. The gentleman on the bale of hay could not help but notice that the cattle were in knee-high grasses and grazing contentedly.

"It was somewhat ironic, as this gentleman was Benjamin Rush, grandson of Senator BF Rush and great grandson of the founder, Hiram Rush. Through the years, this family had practiced good stewardship by rotating livestock in pastures, building stock water tanks and ponds at strategic points to keep livestock from overgrazing. This also made much more pasture available for the animals enabling the stewards to run more livestock thus increasing their profits without damaging the land and environment.

"It must have been sound practice as this enabled the Rush family to not only run cattle, but sheep also, and many horses to operate the equipment for the hay and grain operations. If this were 'overgrazing' they would have been out of business in less than ten years. Instead the ranch flourished over one hundred years.

"My cousin Ben sat silently with his wife Betty and they wondered where the overgrazing and land rape was that the young man was talking about."

I guess I have to ask; "Have we learned anything from our past history and will we continue to make wise decisions for a better future?"

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