

No hurry in picking men, Gold Rush women told

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, February 04, 2007

Advice was to take one's time, and judge a man beyond his fine clothes.

Following the initial Gold Rush years, population numbers grew rapidly in Solano County. Both single men and those looking to bring their families came to Solano County looking to buy land and start a new life.

During those years, men greatly outnumbered women, especially young, unmarried girls.

Traditionally, girls at that time had few choices. They expected to marry and raise a family. They were carefully groomed and educated for this task. This included instruction on how to run a household, cook, sew their own clothes, raise children, and entertain guests. Based on their social status in life, most of the instruction was provided by their parents, though affluent families also hired teachers or sent them to private schools.

The private schools that sprang up around the county, such as Benicia's Young Ladies Seminary in 1852 founded by 12 prominent Benicia families, showed a growing recognition to provide a formal education to daughters that went beyond traditional household skills.

But the harsh pioneer life also created new and exciting opportunities for many women outside the home area. Vacaville's Luzena Stanley Wilson is one example of a pioneer woman who moved beyond the traditional female role to create and operate a number of businesses.

Mostly, marriageable young girls met young men through visiting family and friends, at public events such as the popular May picnic, or at organized concerts, recitals, and public dances.

With so many bachelors present, one can envision a certain competition for a young lady's attention.

An article by an anonymous J. L., published in the Solano Republican on Nov. 24, 1855 and entitled "How To Choose A Husband," gives critical and - for today's reader - amusing advice to those young ladies. J. L. wrote from a male perspective, whether as

a bachelor or as admonishing parent remains unsaid.

"I do not know that the caution on the subject of getting married young is needed anywhere more than California. Now, girls, if a young man happens to look at you do not think that he is in love with you; or, if you happen to be at an evening party, and a gentleman dances with you more than with others, do not think that he likes you the most.

"You may be a good dancer, and any one prefers a good dancer to a poor one; and then, if you find that a gentleman really fancies you, and you like him, do not put yourself in his way, and if that young gentleman hangs about the fence and house, remember that he is not worth having.

"If a young man is looking for a wife, he will try various ways to find out her character. If she puts on a silk dress to wash dishes in, or is extravagant in any way, he will go to the farthest end of Greenland before he will have her, and, above all, will find out if she knows anything.

"Here is another idea for the young ladies of California. If a young man asks you to marry him before you are twenty and will not wait for you, he has not common sense and does not care for you, so I advise all of you not to marry young. Now, girls, if you do not get good husbands, do not blame me."

Right below this article appeared a second little column. Whether by incident or on purpose placed there, it seemed designed to help the young girl remember that a young man also needed to be judged deeper than just by the cut of his clothes.

These, after all, were the years when strangers fresh from the gold fields arrived in town. The second column went on:

"There is, in California, a class of persons who have no visible means of support and whose manner of getting along in the world is an anomaly to most observers. Although they are never known to work, or do any kind of business, they are always well dressed, and, to all outward appearance, perfect gentleman, and well to do in the world. Yet they are often sorely put to it to get a "square meal."

"We knew one of this class, who had been a respectable and industrious young man in the Eastern States, but who, like many others, on coming to California, had become addicted to gambling, and, consequently, had acquired a repugnance to labor. Gambling, of late, having become rather a precarious mode of getting a living, he has often been for several days without being able to get anything to put inside of his fashionable coat. A short time ago, a friend of his, who had known him at home, and

who had just arrived on one of the steamers, met him on the street. He shook him warmly by the hand, and noticing his cadaverous looks, said:

“Why, Charley, you look miserable, have you been sick?”

“Well, yes,” said Charley, “I’ve not been very well lately.”

“Why, what’s been the matter with you?”

“Well - ah - the fact is, you see, I can’t get anything to lay on my stomach!”

This last article allows a glimpse how desperate life could be for those who were trying to survive without skills and without family support. It also gives strength to J. L.’s advice to judge a young man’s intentions by his willingness to wait for the young girl.

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