

Tale spans life of engineer, bridge and grower

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Slowly, Solano County is acquiring its own group of historic structures that become cherished landmarks.

This year, the bridge crossing Pleasants Valley Creek celebrates its 100th anniversary. It will be renamed the Edward R. Thurber Bridge in memory of one of Pleasants Valley's earliest settlers, Edward Robinson Thurber. Thurber lands border Pleasants Valley Road and the crossing at Pleasant Valley Creek.

Solano County engineer Frank Alexander Steiger built the bridge in 1907. He specialized in building roads and bridges.

Steiger was born in San Francisco in 1864 and grew up on a ranch in Vacaville. He received his engineering degree from the University of Michigan. After working as an engineer in Denver and Chicago, he eventually returned to Vacaville.

He found work as a city engineer for Vacaville, Rio Vista, and Benicia. In 1898, he won the election for the office of county surveyor.

At the beginning of the 20th century, concrete was used increasingly for public buildings. The first high-rise building, for example, was built in Chicago in 1903.

Steiger is associated with nearly every public building at that time, using concrete extensively. His works include projects ranging from bridges to Vacaville's first sewer treatment system. His most memorable works are Solano County's Old Courthouse and the Solano County Jail. Of those, only the water tower in the Courthouse parking lot remains.

The Pleasants Valley Road bridge was one of several that Frank Steiger constructed over the years and that still dot our rural landscape.

The road cut through the land belonging to pioneer rancher Edward Robinson Thurber. Edward Thurber was born Sept. 1, 1826 in Providence, R.I. According to his obituary, he "came of sterling New England ancestry."

Edward R. Thurber arrived in San Francisco on Aug. 7, 1850. Like many, he came across the Isthmus of Panama. His obituary in The Reporter on Oct. 7, 1910, said of his

reason to come to California:

“Singularly enough he was not seized by the mining fever, but turned his attention to agriculture. Going to Bodega, Sonoma County, he began the growing of vegetables, which were sent to the San Francisco market, where they commanded a good price. He subsequently removed to Suscol, Napa valley, and then to Suisun valley, where his time was occupied in the pursuit of agriculture.

‘In 1858, he purchased 168 acres of farmland along Pleasants Valley Road and settled here. Once again, he began to grow vegetables.

“It was at this time that he laid the foundation of the fruit industry of Vaca and Pleasants valleys. A vineyard and orchard was set out and when the trees began to bear Mr. Thurber decided the soil was better adapted to fruit than to vegetables.”

Despite setbacks such as the demise of vineyards in the 1870s due to Phyloxxera, he was a very successful orchardist. The 1870 census lists his real estate value alone at \$12,000. The census also listed the men he employed to work on the ranch: three farm laborers from Pennsylvania, Georgia and Massachusetts, respectively, as well as 11 Chinese workers.

In 1859, aged 33, he married 19-year-old Anne (or Annie, as she is registered in many accounts) Squibb, who was born around 1840 in Indiana. The couple had four children: Frances Mary (about 1861), Rufus W. (about 1863), Millicent Emily (about 1869), and Edward R., Jr. (about 1877).

Besides his interest in orchards, Edward Thurber also played a part in local businesses. He was one of the founding directors of the Vaca Valley Railroad Company in 1869, which connected the town to the railroad net. With the establishment of this company, Elmira’s and Suisun City’s transportation monopolies ended.

In 1883, Thurber joined a group of businessmen including William B. Parker, William B. Davis, David Dutton and Reuel Drinkwater Robbins of Suisun. This group of affluent orchardists founded the Bank of Vacaville. The initial capital was \$100,000. For the next 25 years, this would be the only bank in Vacaville until 1910, when the First National Bank of Vacaville opened in the Triangle Building.

Thurber remained active in cultivating his orchards until his death, helped in later years by his sons.

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