

Solano pioneer: rich woman, poor woman

By Nancy Dingler

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The gold rush of 1849 created a massive migration. People from all walks of life and from around the world made their way to the rich gold fields of California. After months of walking across the country from Missouri, Luzena, along with her husband, Mason, and two small children were in sight of the promised land.

“A hungry miner, attracted by the unusual sight of a woman, said to me, ‘I’ll give you five dollars, ma’am for them biscuit.’ It sounded like a fortune to me, and I looked at him to see if he meant it.

“And as I hesitated at such, to me, a very remarkable proposition, he repeated his offer to purchase, and said he would give 10 dollars for bread made by a woman, and laid the shining gold piece in my hand. I made some more biscuits for my family, told my husband of my good fortune, and put the precious coin away as a nest-egg for the wealth we were to gain.”

Local author Fern Henry has brought the words and experiences of Luzena Stanley Wilson to life in her new book, “My Checkered Life.” Originally these stories ran in the San Francisco Call Bulletin.

In her later years, Luzena’s daughter, Correnah, typed the stories and then the women had them bound in leather for presentation to Mills College. Henry was not content to just reprint these stories. She has done exhaustive research, substantiating the stories and setting them into a more complete historical background, giving a better understanding of the remarkable times in which Luzena strove, with stubborn determination, to succeed.

Henry relates how Luzena started out life in the Piedmont region of North Carolina in a Quaker community established in the 1750s near present-day Greensboro. She would end her days living in luxury in a hotel in San Francisco.

Luzena’s parents, Asa and Diana, in 1843 moved to Missouri seeking to stake out 160 acres of government land. Luzena, at age 25, met and married Mason Wilson, who was 37, in Andrew County, Mo., in 1844. Luzena and Mason soon were graced with two sons, Thomas in 1845 and Jay in 1848.

The newlyweds had purchased land and were putting down roots in the community

when the clarion call of gold in California fired their imaginations. Abandoning farm, cabin and family, the foursome headed west.

“Monday we were to be off. Saturday we looked over our belongings, and threw aside what was not absolutely necessary. Beds we must have, and something to eat. It was a strange but comprehensive load which we stowed away in our ‘prairie-schooner.’ “

The prairie-schooner was pulled by oxen. Tied to the tail-gate was Luzena’s “mulley” (means without horns) cow to provide milk for her babies. The cow survived the journey and lived a long, rich life in the green pastures of the Vaca Valley. They departed on Tuesday, May 1, 1849 - Luzena’s 30th birthday.

The “49ers” stretched out for miles, one group of wagon train after another. The arduous daily task of hitching up the oxen, feeding the family and then walking all day before stopping at dusk to unhitch the oxen and feed the family before bedding down for the night, became sheer drudgery.

Hygiene was a problem and because of the lack of it, sickness, mostly in the form of cholera, swept through the wagons. In most cases those stricken did not survive and were buried without a marker on the trail.

The Wilson family was lucky, in that they did not suffer the fate of becoming ill. The most difficult part of the trip was crossing the desert, where animals and their masters collapsed in exhaustion and died where they lay.

“It was a hard march over the desert. The men were tired out goading on the poor oxen which seemed ready to drop at every step. They were covered with a thick coating of dust, even to the red tongues which hung from their mouths, swollen with thirst and heat.

“While we were yet 5 miles from the Carson River, the miserable beasts seemed to sense the freshness in the air, and they raised their heads and traveled briskly.”

Luzena and Mason sold their hard-working oxen and with the proceeds purchased a hotel in Sacramento. The business proved to be profitable. Winter rains came early and steadily. The winter of 1849-‘50 brought a flood. The Wilsons lost everything but their lives.

As soon as they could find a way, they slogged out of the mud of Sacramento to the new gold boom city of Nevada City. They started anew - Luzena cooking for the miners. In the rudest and most crudest manner, Luzena called her “hotel” El Dorado.

Every dollar she made cooking went into the business. "As the days progressed, we prospered. In six weeks we had saved enough money to pay the man who brought us up from Sacramento the \$700 we owed him. In a little time, the frame of a house grew up around me."

Disaster struck again. Nevada City, along with most towns of that period, suffered a fire. The hotel, their entire investment went up in flames, except for the \$500 Mason had in his pants pockets that he had not had time to remove.

This disappointment drove Luzena to bed. She was too ill to deal with anything for a time. They sold their interest in the land the hotel had sat on and moved back to Sacramento. They purchased a run-down, rat-infested hotel and started all over. After a month or so, they decided to try their hand at farming and moved to the Vaca Valley.

Mason set about cutting the wild hay, while Luzena set up her cook stove and began cooking for the travelers to the gold fields. They finally prospered, owning most of Vacaville while it was still an embryonic village.

Henry tells of the Wilson family's tragedies and the ups and downs of life that Luzena and Mason overcame. They continued enlarging and providing for their family until Mason abruptly left for Texas, never to return.

If you want to learn more about Luzena's and Mason's Solano County pioneering saga, Henry's book, "My Checkered Life" can be purchased at the Vacaville Museum Store or ordered through any book seller. The story about the Wilsons can also be ordered directly from the publisher, Carl Mautz Publishing, at www.carlmautz.com or (530) 478-1610.

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