

# **The Patwins, the settlers and Lake Solano**

**By Nancy Dingler**

Saturday, April 17, 2004

For thousands, if not millions, of years Putah Creek flowed through Berryessa Valley, and out Devil's Gate, meandering along the border between Yolo and Solano counties, on its way to the Delta.

By 1957, a radical change would alter the ancient landscape.

The creek's year-round flow brought animals and man to Putah's banks. The very earliest settlers were the southern Patwins. These California Native Americans settled in a land that was blessed with a mild climate and an abundance of wild animals, such as deer, elk, bears, along with fish and birds. The acorns, berries, fruit, seeds and roots were easily accessible for the picking.

The Patwins were hunters-gatherers. There was no need to plant or stay bound to the land by permanent structures or cultivation. They were freed from those constraints because they would never be hungry or be without the raw materials to create hunting tools, baskets or temporary shelters.

They established villages and would migrate from one to the next, following the seasons and food supply. The banks of Putah Creek provided a rich diversity throughout the year, and the obsidian used in spears and arrowheads could be found close at hand.

The Patwins' lifestyle would come to an end with the incursion of the Spanish in the early 1800s. By 1837, smallpox brought back from Fort Ross would run rampant for the next two years, decimating the native population. When the "white" settlers arrived and set about creating cattle and wheat ranches, and cultivating fruit and nut orchards, there were hardly any natives left.

John Reed Wolfskill arrived in the area as the first "white man" to establish a ranch on a Mexican grant from Gov. Juan Bautista de Alvarado. The ranch was named Rio De Los Putos in 1842.

Wolfskill was born in 1804 in Boonesborough, Ky. John decided in 1838 to follow his older brother, William, to California. William had settled near Pueblo de Los Angeles and taken Mexican citizenship. William had acquired land with vineyards. He was well known for pioneering many varieties of fruits, nuts and citrus.

John, however, felt that his brother was paying a “pittance” for his labor and sought his own land.

Southern California land that had water, had already been granted. John was discouraged by this fact, so he was more than agreeable when Juan Jose Warner encouraged John to try Northern California, especially the area around Putah Creek.

Warner described the vast fertile lands that lay between the coast ranges and the Sacramento River marshes. In 1840 John Wolfskill left Los Angeles for Sonoma.

There he intended to ask for General Vallejo’s help in acquiring a grant of land. Vallejo saw no reason to assist John with the land grant. Then he met Jacob Leese, son-in-law to Vallejo. With Leese’s help, John would live on the land and tend the cattle of his brother William, the Mexican citizen.

Over the years, the town of Monticello would grow and flourish in the Berryessa Valley. Wolfskill would found the town of Winters. Then Daniel Tucker moved to the area and began to quarry limestone for foundation blocks. To this day, an entire block of houses on Main Street in Winters still rest on this quarried rock. Tucker was also a blacksmith.

After years of resistance from the Monticello townspeople, the Bureau of Reclamation, in 1957, built a dam, creating Lake Berryessa. In doing so, the entire town was razed, the cemetery moved and the families forced to relocate.

In conjunction with “Monticello” dam, a diversion dam was also built, creating Lake Solano. Over the eons Putah Creek would regularly flood during heavy rains in the winter. The huge oaks and brush that choked the canyon slowed the flood waters to a slow, gentle flow.

The Patwins established their camps high along the banks, well out of reach of the flood waters. When Wolfskill built his homes, they too were out of the range of the winter floods.

After the construction of the dam, the Bureau of Reclamation had all the trees and brush cleared, which meant instead of a gentle flow, the water now rushed down the canyon with great force and volume.

The Jack Faye family saw the opportunity to start a fishing and boat rental business near the bridge on Pleasants Valley Road that crosses Putah Creek. The Fayes introduced peacocks with the idea that the birds would get rid of the rattlesnakes.

Peacocks do have a reputation for killing snakes, but evidently as rattlesnake

controllers, they were a bust. The Fayes ran their business until the 1970s when the Department of Fish and Game decided to buy out a number of the properties along the Putah with a view to creating a public park.

At the time of acquisition, there were about 80 breeding pairs of peacocks, which today still roam the hillsides with the wild turkeys. Dedication day for the opening of the park to the public was on June 5, 1973.

There are still vestiges of the Patwins. Arrowheads, spear points and evidence of campsites with their mortars and pestles are always being discovered.

In November of 1995, the first Wolfskill Holiday Festival was held at Lake Solano County Park and attracted around 1,500 people. The festival was held for several consecutive years, but none are planned currently.

The park boasts a boathouse with rental boats and a small natural history museum with some "hands on" displays. There is also a display dedicated to Mr. Tucker and one devoted to farm implements.

The park is dotted with heritage oaks and buckeyes. Each year the Fish and Game officials restock the lake with black bass for the children's annual fishing tournament. It can't be stocked too far ahead, because river otters have discovered the "free hand out" and make quick work of what is not caught on the end of a pole.

Lake Solano Regional Park encompasses wild and rocky outcroppings that have existed since the dawn of time. Wild critters still roam and can be glimpsed in the early mornings. The park is owned and operated by Solano County and consists of 45 acres on both sides of Pleasants Valley Road, plus shoreline leased from the Bureau of Reclamation bordering the 100-acre lake.

On the west side of the road, there are picnic sites where fishing and boat rental are encouraged. On the east side of Pleasants Valley Road, RV campsites are available. To reserve a campsite, the Lake Solano Regional Park can be reached at (530) 795-2990.

The Museum Roundtable Committee is in high gear working toward presenting a comprehensive business model to the county. They are receiving many offers of historical artifact donations, as well as financial and political support. They can always use more support in their determination to create a county museum in Fairfield.

Special note: This column is celebrating its fourth year in the Daily Republic. I cannot express my gratitude enough to the publisher and editors who have made the

publication of these history stories possible. I must give a big thanks to all the special people who supply me with the wonderful material and who have enriched my life in the process. I look forward to many years of exploration and delight in discovery.

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