

Colorful adventurer worked the spectrum from druggist to a blockade runner

By Jerry Bowen

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One of the lesser known characters that once lived in Vaca Valley was a man known as Capt. Richard H. Chinn. What little is known about him came mostly from stories he told about his life to friends. Indeed, if all the stories were true, his life would read like an adventure novel.

Capt. Chinn was born in Scott County, Ky., on December 28, 1826. Not much is known about him until he moved in with Henry Clay, an American political leader. Clay was secretary of state under John Quincy Adams and an unsuccessful candidate for the presidency in 1824, 1832, and 1844. He was also a law professor and a member of the board of trustees for Transylvania University in Lexington, Ky. Chinn lived with Henry Clay and his family for many years and attended Transylvania University where he studied to be a druggist and graduated with high honors.

As a Southerner in the days before the Civil War, Chinn's opinion that black people were inferior often surfaced in ill-favored ways. One such example is the day he and a group of college friends attended a stage show during a lull in their college studies. Entering the theater they took great offense at a sign which read "Negroes and College Students, one-half price." Young Chinn and his equally foolish friends stormed the theater, demolishing all the chairs and windows before they were apprehended. There is no local record of what punishment, if any, was levied on the offensive actions of Chinn and his companions. The arresting officer, Sheriff Richard Long, would in later years move to Vacaville and become the town recorder.

In spite of his escapades, Chinn graduated with a degree in medicine and moved to New Orleans where he successfully ran a drug business for several years.

During a trip to New York by steamer, the ship was wrecked somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico. Luck was with him and seven other passengers when they were able to board a raft, but lady luck would soon abandon them. Drifting aimlessly for days, facing a prolonged and agonizing death by dehydration and starvation, they made the ultimate decision. Drawing lots, the loser was sacrificed, becoming life-saving sustenance for the remaining shipwreck survivors. Adrift another week they finally reached shore somewhere on the coast of Central America. Chinn would remain in Central America for a year.

Returning to New Orleans about the time the Civil War broke out, he became a blockade runner, smuggling ammunition, gunpowder and guns to the Confederate Army. Once again lady luck deserted Mr. Chinn. Captured during an attempt to run a vessel loaded with war contraband through a blockade, he was quickly tried and sentenced to two years imprisonment by Gen. Ben Butler. From this time on he was known as "Captain" Chinn.

The conditions in the prison camps were wretched; the stench was insufferable, rations were meager, and it was almost impossible to move around due to overcrowding. The sick were left lying about because the hospitals were full. Seldom was there any drinking water, except when it rained. After serving several months of his sentence under these miserable conditions, Capt. Chinn regained his freedom by bribing a guard with \$150. Making his way to Cuba, he spent the next 14 years amassing a fortune, although it is not known how.

He returned to America in 1880, settling along with his new wife in Chico. He lived there for two years and in 1882 moved to Vacaville to invest in the fruit business.

Capt. Chinn was a popular guest at social gatherings where he would recount stories of his past accomplishments and colorful adventures. His home on Naylor Hill near Foothill Drive was also the scene of many social activities.

Capt. Chinn was struck down with a stroke on September 11, 1898, which paralyzed him. After the stroke, he was under the close care of Dr. J. W. Stitt on an almost daily basis for nearly 18 months. A second stroke claimed the life of Capt. Chinn in his home on Saturday afternoon, December 15, 1900. In accordance with Chinn's instructions, Dr. Stitt shipped the body to the I. O. O. F. cemetery in San Francisco for cremation. He was survived by his wife; an unmarried daughter living in Washington, D.C.; a second daughter living in Boston, Mass., who was married to Rear Admiral Walker; and a sister, Mrs. Ripley of Brooklyn, N.Y.

Perhaps some of the stories Capt. Chinn told were somewhat embellished or entirely the product of an overactive imagination. Even so, if only some of the stories were true, he would have been quite the character worthy of an attentive ear.

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