Historical Articles of Solano County

Never heard of Nurse's Landing? Read on - Saturday, August 19, 2006

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By Nancy Dingler

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Stephen K. Nurse grew up to be one of those remarkable people - larger than life - who can do anything.

Born in New York in 1820, he was the very definition of a "fiddlefoot," not being able to stay in one place or do one thing for very long. Nurse started out his adult career as a school teacher and would go on to found a town in Solano County.

The year 1839 found Nurse teaching for a year in New York. From there he went to Michigan, then back to New York and on to Ohio for two years, ending in 1842. He also worked as a farmhand in Ohio.

Finding teaching not to be his calling, he decided to study medicine and dentistry and went on to work as a traveling dentist through 1847. His next job was as a telegrapher in Springfield, Ill.

Nurse was one of the early gold seekers to California, setting sail from New York via the Panama Canal, arriving in 1848 in the fledgling port of San Francisco. Striking out for the gold fields, he mined in the Sierra and learned to run a stage line for L.B. Mizner, then went on to work as a surveyor for a railroad company in South America.

Upon his return from South America, he settled in Benicia, staying with his brother William, who had set up residence there. They moved shortly afterward to Montezuma Township, where Nurse built a 144-square-foot house near the water. His homestead would become known as Nurse's Landing. It became a shipping port and a small community sprang up around it.

In the year 1855, Nurse was elected to the first Solano County Board of Supervisors. He was a member of the Masonic Order and became a Master of Benicia Lodge No. 5, one of the oldest in the state.

Two events changed Nurse's Landing in 1858. The town was renamed Denverton to honor Congressman J.W. Denver, who had supported the land squatters in opposing a bill in Congress to confirm all existing land grants. In the agreement of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, between the United States and Mexico, these land grants were to be honored. The second act was to establish the Denverton post office.

Where is Denverton and what happened to the town? As you leave Fairfield on Highway 12, toward Rio Vista, upon passing the Railway Museum, you will see a road sign to your left reading "Denverton Road." Pause for a moment on your busy drive and wander up this road.

There are a few old buildings and a couple of newer ones. Crossing the bridge, you can see the remnants of pilings that once supported the old wooden bridge in the center of town. This is all that is left of the thriving community of Denverton. On the Highway 12 side of the road stood the school house and hotel. Across the street was a store and several homes.

Another one of Nurses' brothers, D.A. Nurse, arrived from New York with his wife, Harriet. They joined Nurse and his brother in the new township. In 1862, D.A. and Harriet sailed for New York aboard the steamship, Golden Gate. Sadly, the ship foundered, burned and sank of the coast of Mexico. D.A. was killed, but Harriet was rescued and returned to Denverton, where she married Stephen. It was common practice for widows to remarry within the spouse's family.

By 1866 Nurse built a brick store and a 100-foot long wharf. Later, the wharf would stretch to 300 feet. Attempting to establish a grain shipping port in 1867, he constructed a huge hay warehouse and a 60 by 100-foot brick warehouse near the wharf that could hold 2,500 tons of grain.

Farms had sprung up, since the Gold Rush, which were producing wheat by the ton. It is referred to as the "great wheat boom." The town prospered and seemed firmly established. Then the railroad came. The California Pacific Railroad could provide cheaper fare than shipping by boat or ferry. At about the same time, Collinsville had superior shipping access.

Eventually the weather changed and the wheat boom went bust. These factors combined, caused the slow decline and disappearance of the thriving little town. In the interim, when the post office was established, it created the position of postmaster for Nurse over the next 21 years. The post office closed in 1911.

In 1875, Nurse put up a telegraph line from Denverton to Suisun. A year later, the line merged into the Montezuma Telegraph Co. Evidently, the service stretched from Rio Vista to Suisun via Collinsville and Bird's Landing. The telegraph line was 35 miles long and had six offices situated along its length. Nurse was president and M. Pietrzycki was its vice president.

By 1878, the town could boast a store, blacksmith shop, a wheelwright, a meat market, hotel, school house and a Good Templars Hall. It was a thriving community.

The Cumberland Presbyterians built a church in 1870 that was located about halfway between Denverton and Bird's Landing. Five years later a fire destroyed the house of worship. Without fuss or dithering, the good folks got together and rebuilt the church, re-opening for services a year later.

The Shiloh Church still exists. In 1955, the church was restored. It stands as a marker and guardian over the pioneer cemetery. At the time of its restoration, the building was designated as a historic landmark and is well-maintained by members of the Montezuma 4H club.

Nurse passed away in July, 1905 in Suisun at age 85. He is buried in the Fairfield Cemetery. Nurse suffered from poor health, according to the obituary notice, for the last 20 years of his life. His brother William is buried in Benicia, while Harriet has a memorial dedicated to her at the Fairfield Cemetery which reads, "The First Person to Endow the Cemetery."

In spite of the health problems, at the end, Nurse certainly led an interesting and fulfilling life. He stood out not just as an early pioneer in the county, but as a person who set out to try to do just about anything, successfully. Keeping busy, building a town, kept Nurse from ever again traveling to distant places with that itchy "fiddlefoot."