

Silveyville rolls into Dixon when railroad arrives

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, February 19, 1995

Information for this article came from the Dixon Historical Society collection and the Dixon Library archives.

At one time Silveyville, had real expectations. Today it's a ghost town.

The visionary for Silveyville was Elijah Silvey. He built a way station - tavern and corral - circa 1852, on the stagecoach road connecting Vacaville and Davisville.

To ensure that the steady flow of would-be miners heading for the gold fields would seek drink, food and perhaps overnight lodging at Elijah's, a red lantern was hoisted nightly high above the wild oats. Some claimed the oats in this area reached a height of 8 to 10 feet.

Eventually a small community grew out of this way station. By 1860, Silveyville boasted a store, saloon, a school, two churches, a blacksmith, drugstore and homes for the 100 residents.

Originally from Pennsylvania, Thomas Dickson, a farmer and self-proclaimed minister, came by covered wagon to California from Iowa. In 1853, at age 53, he brought with him 12 head of oxen, two or three cows, three wagons, some horses, five children - ages 7 to 19 - and a pregnant wife.

Whether he briefly settled in Silveyville is unclear. The folklore is that in 1853, upon seeing his daughter, Martha, ride her Indian pony over the plains where Dixon is today, the wild oats as high as the pony's back he decided to farm this land, wild oats being a viable crop.

The certainty is that he did settle this land along with the Van Sants and McFaddens. But before he could begin to turn soil, he had to clear the land of the piles of aged, sun-bleached elk horns. Then he built a two-story house, remarkable in that it was all plaster inside.

This cluster of families farmed and established a general store and a post office. During heavy rains, Dixon was quite isolated, as water would stand between it and Sacramento. That was to change with the coming of the locomotive.

During the first stages of the planning to build a railroad linking Sacramento and San

Francisco, a survey showed the tracks would come very near this small settlement.

Dickson, by now a prosperous rancher, offered to give 10 acres of land to the railroad. The railroad superintendent sent out the word: "Put a sign on that last new station, "Call it Dickson." One legend is that, failing to also spell "Dickson" to the clerk, the literature, timetable, and signs were printed as "Dixon." Thomas Dickson said, "Let it stand."

Another tale is that the town's name was changed to Dixon when the first consignment of goods arrived addressed to "Dixon." This form was then adopted as the preferred spelling. Which do you suspect is the true account?

The California Pacific Railroad was built in 1867.

Dickson was instrumental in convincing the residents of Silveyville to relocate to Dixon, a distance of about three miles.

Olin Timm is a prominent Dixon historian. His grandfather, Peter, was one of the leading men in devising a plan to transport Silveyville's buildings, and he supplied his own muscle and brawn in the move.

Huge log rollers, gangs of men and 40-horse teams were employed. Only on such flat land could this have been accomplished. The logs were placed under each building and, as the building was pulled forward, the men would seize the log emerging from the rear and place it up front. Olin remembers his grandmother showing him the roller logs stored in her barn.

Some people recollected that flat cars and steel rails were also used; if so, all evidence of these vanished.

One of the buildings that was relocated was the Methodist Church. They held service on Sunday while en route. This church is the only remaining building from that moved, and you can find it at Jackson and B Streets.

On Sept. 3, 1870, the Solano Democrat announced, "Silveyville ... can scarcely survive if houses continue to be moved much longer at the present rates." By 1871 it was reported that every movable building in Silveyville had been transported to Dixon.

The whole surrounding area was farmland, and transportation was by wagon on dirt roads. The dust was inches thick, choking a man's throat. In the summer, after the harvest, there was a constant stream of wagons and rising dust that could be seen for miles.

With the arrival of the locomotive, the wagons would now stop at Dixon, and so the community had great promise of thriving by offering needed goods and services. "It was no uncommon occurrence for 180 wagons to be seen in single day, all loaded grain and each drawn by an 8- to 10-mule team."

The official founding date for Dixon is 1868.

Dixon developed a line of shops from 1868 through the 1920s. There were wooden sidewalks and awnings over the stores. The streets were dust ridden in the summer and muddy in the winter.

Though the first settlers of Dixon were of Scotch descent and then the emigres from Silveyville, Dixon was to be populated in the future by a large number of people of German descent.

Eppingers, later Schulze's Department Store, sold plows, barrows, canned goods, meat, hardware, yard goods, overalls and saddles. Farmers were billed annually. Once, when Eppingers failed to charge a customer for a saddle, the store billed everyone for one saddle; 80 percent paid. During Schulze's ownership, the store bought grain and the balances were held by the store; thus it operated as a private bank.

There were usually two butcher shops. The butchering was done in sheds just outside of town.

Steinmiller's made and repaired harnesses and were noted for repairing grain drapers for harvesters; the draper being the canvas conveyor belt, which needed constant rebuilding.

Livery stables were abundant. Kirby's Drug Store was the chief victim of the 1892 earthquake that sent all the bottles crashing to the floor.

There were blacksmith shops for shoeing horses, shrinking steel tires on wagon wheels and pounding out plowshares. One of the blacksmiths was also an undertaker and the coffins were regally carried to the cemetery in his horse-drawn hearse.

There was a brick hotel. The top floors of three buildings on Main Street were for fraternal organizations: Masons, Oddfellows and Redmens. Oddfellows frequently loaned money out, thus also acting as a bank. Barber shops flourished. Since hot water was rationed on the farms - saved for coffee, washing clothes and scalding pigs to remove their bristles - barber shops had tubs for bathing in the rear.

There were a number of churches besides the Methodist Church. There was a Baptist

Church and later the United Protestant Church on Main Street. The Presbyterian Church, a wooden structure, was also on Main. The Catholic and Lutheran churches were on Second; the Lutheran Church was the only one with a pipe organ.

Saloons were on the scene in spades! At one time there were reportedly 20 saloons in Dixon. Many homes had their walkways decoratively edged with inverted empty beer bottles driven in the ground. Fisher's Saloon was one of the quieter bars. McDermott's Fly Trap beckoned the rowdier crowd. Witnesses said that after much drinking, a man would go out and float in the watering trough awhile before returning to the bar. "Fast houses" were in evidence as would fit a community where much of the labor on the farms was single men.

The Opera House, seating 600, offered other entertainment. The black minstrel show was locally conceived. LuLu Evans was the opera star and the daughter of Dixon's Dr. Evans.

The story goes that the most interesting performance was by the two-headed woman, who sang soprano with one head and alto with the other.

Before circa 1900, what was to become Dixon's May Day was a harness racing event. With all the betting and beer about, many families left town to picnic elsewhere.

In 1874 there was one constable, a justice of the peace and a night watchman. Once a fellow was jailed for exposing his person indecently. He was determined to get out of jail and tried to burn his way out, nearly suffocating in the failed attempt.

By 1879 Dixon had a town marshal. One of his jobs was to report the collection of license fees (probably from saloons and hotels) and town taxes. For one quarter, the licenses crime to \$24 and taxes \$443.15. The marshal's bill was \$40.12.

Abraham Kirby assumed the duties of the office of sheriff of Solano County in 1883. The duties must not have been too stressful, as Abraham still operated his drugstore in Dixon. In 1889 a new, two-story jail was built. The jail was brick with cement floors, and the doors on the two cells were iron, 4 inches thick. Once built, it was concluded this could cause some difficulty in breathing for the prisoners and probably some perforations would have to be made in the doors. The upstairs was for offices.

A 1890 directory gave some of the following information about Dixon: population 1,000; five teachers, 250 students; bank capital, \$4,231; flour mill; weekly newspaper, The Tribune, which came out on Saturdays; gas works; volunteer fire department; shipments - grain, fruit, grapes; tri-weekly mail stage.

When Thomas Dickson was in his 80s, he was almost killed by a train. He was so deaf by this time, he couldn't hear the train coming. He survived this close call and died in 1885. He was 85 years old.

By the 1870s Silveyville ceased all competition with Dixon and virtually ceased to exist. Today a lone monument stands at the heart of what was once a town with some expectations. Go to intersection of Silveyville and Schroeder, and you will be standing in a ghost town.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/497>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/497/>