

## **Pena Adobe: Monument to pioneer family**

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The Pena Adobe, a registered historical landmark, was the original home of Juan Felipe Pena in the 1840s.

The adobe is situated on Pena's share of a Spanish land grant that he had in partnership with Manuel Vaca. They called the land grant Rancho Los Putos, and it was a total of 44,386 acres stretching roughly from the Suisun Creek to Putah Creek and from the Sacramento River to the foothills.

When California changed hands from the Spanish to the Anglos, the partners were forced to spend years securing their rights to this land. It wasn't until 1858 that they were recognized as legal owners by the U.S. Supreme Court.

By one report, Pena and Vaca made a first trip from New Mexico to Solano County in 1838-39 to survey the area and secure a land claim; this was attested to in court by Gen. Vallejo in 1854.

It was in 1841 that the Pena and Vaca families came here by way of the Old Spanish trail, Pena with his wife, Isabella, and six children. During a rest stop at the Santa Barbara mission, they added a work crew to their company of 25 Native Americans.

The Penas were among the earliest settlers of European ancestry here. The Pena Adobe was built by the Native American crew with sun-baked adobe bricks for the construction. Redwood was used to build doors, window and door frames and ceiling beams.

While it was being built, the family stayed at the Sonoma mission. They traveled to and from Sonoma on what would become known as "Pena Pass." The trail led over the hills and came out at "Laguana" Valley. This pass was to become the trail between Sonoma and Sutter's Fort and from San Rafael and Sonoma to San Jose and Monterey.

The family was living in the adobe by 1842, and the Penas occupied the premises up to 1918. It was not the spacious Spanish ranch house of film lore. Pena's home was of modest size, just about the size of a two-car garage: Three rooms, dirt floor and four windows.

In the early days, the cooking was done outdoors. There was a bake oven big enough to hold an adult pig. Fire pits were set up so that kettles and other cooking vessels sat on top of rocks. Also, large kettles hung over open fires. Bread was baked in a Dutch oven. It is supposed there was a lean-to, so that a side wall protected the cooking area from wind and rain.

By 1846, Pena owned 2,000 cattle and 200 to 300 horses. Twenty Indians were hired to look after the animals. Family folklore is that Pena's brother, the Vacas' brothers and some Indian vaqueros went to Mexico to buy horses and cattle, which they drove to California. It is said they crossed the Sacramento River at Rio Vista.

In those days, cattle were valued for their hides and tallow. Dried hides, "California bank notes" were valued at \$1 to \$3. These "notes" were traded for goods. Some goods were brought from ship stores, the shopping mall of the day. Ships would anchor in San Francisco Bay, with bay boats shuttling the rancheros with their hides to the ships and returning them to shore with merchandise in hand.

In 1852, Pena's stock was worth \$15,000; however, at this time, wheat was replacing cattle as the valued commodity of the area, so the Penas adapted, changing their focus to wheat production. By 1870, wheat profits were on the decline and orchards and vineyards were shown to carry the profits. Once again the Pena family adapted, becoming successful fruit growers and farmers.

In the course of this time, the adobe was remodeled at least three times. In the 1840s and early 1850s the tule-thatched roof was replaced with hand-split shake. In the 1880s the home was enlarged and "modernized." The entire building was encased in wood sheathing. Porches around the house were enclosed to form four additional rooms. These rooms did not have entrances into the main house. Being cut off, they were heated with wood-burning stoves. The main house was heated with terra cotta charcoal burners. Sometime in this time frame the inside walls were plastered.

Prior to 1888 a proper kitchen and dining area were added. A well was dug beneath the kitchen floor and a hand pump was installed for easy delivery of water. In the 1880s a drilled, cased well and pump could be installed for \$35.

There was no indoor plumbing. There were several wells outside for household use, laborers and the barn areas. An 1860s family account tells of outbuildings near the adobe; barns, blacksmith shop and two or three buildings for work crews.

Juan Felipe died in 1861, leaving the adobe to his only daughter, Nestora Pena Rivera, along with 1,000 acres. His wife Isabella stayed at the adobe until she died in 1884. Both husband and wife pioneers were buried in Benicia.

Modern-day excavations at the site have uncovered finds revealing prehistoric Indian occupation and a burial site. These finds are now on display at the Mowers Goheen Museum next to the adobe. The adobe itself sits on top of a prehistoric mound.

Other digs concentrated on clues to life as lived by the Pena family. Some of these finds included evidence of the following: soda bottles; effervescent drinks in flavors such as lemon, ginger, pineapple, peach and vanilla; beer from a San Jose brewery.

Whiskey. Wine and champagne. Mineral water - these waters were sold as cure-alls, said to relieve, among other things, consumption, kidney stones and indigestion. "Hair Vigor" touted to restore gray hair to its original color, promote growth and cure dandruff. Shoe polish. Glass buttons. Lamp chimneys. Cufflink. Hat pin. Chamber pots. Inkwells. Pipe. Ceramic dolls and toy dishes. Rifles, shotguns and "fighting" knife. Jew's harp. Pocket watch. English ceramics from Staffordshire - inexpensive ironstone ware shipped to the United States.

With no general store nearby, the Pena's lifestyle stressed self-sufficiency. They made their own rawhide chairs. Tables were home-crafted. Mattresses were of sheep wool and comforters of wool batting. Traveling peddlers were a source of some merchandise.

One peddler, Rose Pena Coombs recalled, was a "little old German" called "Snicklefritz." He came from Vallejo carrying an immense pack on his back and large packs in each hand. Among the goods inside were socks, stockings, pins needles, thread, underwear, perfume, hairpins, ribbons, combs, soaps, handkerchiefs and laces.

He would spend the night at the Pena's and head off to Vacaville and Sacramento the next day. By the late 1880s the Penas were purchasing their furniture and other goods in nearby Vacaville and Elmira.

When Juan Felipe passed on, he deeded his land to his children.

Jose Demetrio Pena became a leader in fruit-growing and grain production from 1863 to 1874. In 1874, with 386 acres in Laguna Valley, he was ranked as having the ninth-largest income in Vacaville.

Juan Antonio Pena owned 314 acres and was also a successful grower, watermelons being his most profitable crop.

Nestora Pena Rivera and her husband lived in the adobe and had orchards, almonds, cherries, olive trees and figs being a few of their cash crops.

Several generations were born and raised in the adobe. At one pint, Romana, Little Mary and Big Mary were the local Indians who looked after the children, did the washing, mending and helped with the cooking

Even from the beginning a Spanish teacher was brought in to teach the children. Nestora went on to attend St. Catherine's Convent in Benicia. Her literacy was a proud accomplishment. Often men, women and children would gather round the adobe to hear her read.

It was as simple, hard-working existence at the adobe. The one form of recreation all seemed to enjoy was horseback riding. Weddings and baptisms (waiting until a number of children could be baptized at one time and even a wedding or two thrown in at the same time) were occasions when the family made the daylong journey by ox-drawn cart to the mission in Sonoma.

One wedding was particularly noteworthy; when Maria Vaca and Jesus Pena, children of the pioneer men, tied the knot.

Relations between the fathers were strained by now due to disagreements regarding land sales. Among those attending the ceremony were Gen. Vallejo, Andres Pico (brother of Gov. Pio Pico), and Albert Lyon and his wife, members of the ill-fated Donner Party.

The receptions that followed at the Vaca Rancho featured the gruesome spectator sport of the day - grizzly vs. bull. The bear had to fight bull after bull until it succumbed.

Nestora left the adobe in 1918 to live the rest of their days in Vacaville. Maria Dolores Pena Lyon (she married the son of the Donner Party couple) lived in the adobe until 1920. The place basically remained vacant from there on.

Maria deeded the adobe to her children in 1947. They sold it to Solano County Supervisors Delbert Mowers and William Goheen in 1957. They in turn deeded it and 1 1/2 acres to the Solano County Historical Society. Title was then turned over to the city of Vacaville in 1961. Donations were taken and under the supervision of Merle Curtice, restoration of the adobe to bring it back to its original 1840s appearance began in 1962.

About 70 inmates from the California Medical Facility were employed for this undertaking. The work was completed in 1965. The only bit of construction not restored to the original was the tule-thatch roof.

That the Pena family was able to hold onto its land through so many generations was a rare occurrence during this time in history. Certainly, in these years, they sold vast

tracks of land and lost more to payments to lawyers. But they essentially held on. Most with Spanish land grants watched their holdings totally diminish because of their inability to read or write English, the legal battles and ensuing fees and confrontations with Anglo squatters. And many were also unable to adapt, as the Penas did, from raising cattle to agriculture production.

One last look at the adobe through Rose Pena Coombs' 1885 notes. Shawl on the table with a Bible, photo album and other religious books. Sofa and chairs upholstered in velvet. An organ in one corner. Beautiful carpet on the floor. Double beds and washstands in the bedrooms. Toilet outside. Black mission grape forming arbors at each porch, the grapes said to have come from the Santa Barbara mission when Pena and Vaca made their trip in 1841.

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