

Early village's rural assets drew raves from many

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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The town of Vacaville grew slowly, from its inception with two buildings and a handful of settlers in 1851 to a town of 71 families by June 1880, totaling 361 inhabitants. Another 141 families lived in the surrounding area, adding 938 people to the population number.

Whereas in 1858 the town had a single developed street in the center of the town, with two stores, several saloons, the Wilson House, the Ulatis Academy, blacksmith and wagon shops and a few buildings, by 1870 there were 76 buildings, complete with five grocers and other assorted tradesmen.

The Weekly Solano Republican reported on September 18, 1873, that a San Francisco newspaper had given "a very favorable notice of Vacaville as a place of residence. It is healthy; the climate is remarkably fine; it is located in an exceedingly rich section of the country furnishing the earliest fruits and vegetables of the State; property is offered at low figures and is on the advance; society is good, considering the population, we know of no place that can boast of more good, high-toned citizens"; the village is "unsurpassed for its good order and high moral tone"; and the "educational facilities present the very strongest argument" in its favor."

Well-known botanist Willis Linn Jepson, son of early pioneers, was born in 1867 on the family's Little Oak Ranch, which was situated east of today's Peabody Road and south of Alamo Road. During his years teaching botany at University of California, Berkeley, he kept several diaries in which he recorded memories of his childhood in Vacaville and on the family ranch.

A keen observer with a good sense of humor and a poetic style of writing, his diaries are full of exciting details. His recollections of Vacaville in the early 1870s, before the economic heyday of the fruit industry, give us a vivid impression of this small, but growing town.

"The village was a quiet place - a truly country village. Sounds there were the most distinctive the clang of the anvil in the blacksmith shops. The most distinctive, the most picturesque was Cernon's, Hugh Cernon, the smith, a huge place, tremendous, cavernous, with great recesses and nooks, and a wagon shop on one side where wagons were built. ...

"A characteristic feature was the hitching rack. Here farmers tied their teams for the time they did business in the village. The earth became excavated near the posts; the stamping of the shod feet cut the earth into fine dust blown away by the wind under the years. Men also came into the village to loaf and drink at the saloons, leaving their patient horses without food or water tied to the hitching rack until far into the night - their owners gambling and drinking. ...

"When a very small lad, I liked to go with my father on trips to the village. Sometimes though the day palled and waiting became tiresome. I wandered to the end of the village business street and stood a bit on the corner by the Wilson House. ... Down the side street, at its further end, all shaded by tall trees and beneath the trees the grain fields stretch away to the hills, there at the street end two lads about my own age played ball, shouting aloud to each other as the ball went to and fro. ... Thought I, how pleasant to live in the village, to be a boy in the village and always have some boy to play with. ... But, home again there was my riding horse, and scarcely a boy in the village had a riding horse ..."

Yet while the town was the commercial center for the surrounding area, a trip into Vacaville was not a daily affair easily undertaken. Instead, the occasional peddler would venture to the outlying areas to present his wares to the farmers. Jepson also remembers this colorful occasion.

"The Pack Peddler - We saw him coming far down the road - moving slowly but steadily under his great burden. His visit was an event in the household. He brought atmosphere of far-off worlds - laces from France, linen from Ireland, colored silks from India, a rare shawl from Persia - and strange odd and ends of all kind. The man himself with his alien accent, swarthy features and tricks of the trades was an introduction in a small way to marts and merchants far beyond our horizons. When I saw Arabs, Syrians, Turks bearing burdens - unbelievable weights - in Constantinople, Haifa, Cairo in later years, I thought of the childhood peddler as he raised to his back a weight which seemed to my childhood eyes miraculous."

Jepson's diaries

Thanks to a pair of diligent volunteers, the diaries of Willis Linn Jepson have been transcribed. The transcripts are available for perusal in the Vacaville Museum's research library. Museum hours: Wednesday-Sunday 1 p.m.-4:30 p.m. Web site: www.vacavillemuseum.org . Phone: 447-4513.

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