

Juan Manuel Vaca: The don of Vacaville

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The family name Vaca came about during the Moorish wars in Spain. Any man who marked a strategic river ford with a cow's skull was rewarded by the king with the name Cabeza de Vaca (cow's head).

Juan Manuel Vaca reportedly was born about 1787 in Santa Fe, in what is now New Mexico. It is presumed he served as a soldier there.

Then for a number of reasons, the quality of life there became less than desirable: politics, a lowering of social status for Mexicans and Indian hostilities were some of the problems. Therefore, stories of lush cattle feed, ample streams of water and a pleasant climate in California must have had tremendous appeal. Some of these picture-perfect stories no doubt came from Manuel Armijo, the first European settler in the Suisun Valley and a relative of Vaca.

Some records state that Vaca made a scouting trip to Solano County in 1838-39 and Gen. Vallejo pointed him in the direction of land around "Laguna" Valley (Lagoon Valley).

The same account indicates that Juan Felipe Pena, also from Santa Fe, accompanied Vaca on this trip. The ties between these two men were undoubtedly strong, and they ultimately formed a partnership in securing a land grant.

One Vaca descendent said that Armijo was Pena's stepfather and it is known that Pena addressed Vaca, who was a number of years older, as "godfather."

If they did make this initial trip, then on their return to New Mexico they made plans to move to California.

In 1841, the men with their families (Vaca had eight children) set out over the Old Spanish Trail to California. Vaca's wife had passed away in 1839, and he cashed in her estate to make the trip.

They took off from the little frontier town of Abiquiu, New Mexico. This was where one

had to wait to get permission to even travel to California.

The traveling party Vaca and Pena joined was led by John Rowland and William Workman. It was the first group to travel the Old Spanish Trail seeking new homes in California. The Rowland-Workman Co. took pack mules and horses for transportation. The trail was too rugged, precipitous and narrow in places for wagons.

Family folklore is that a saddle bag was hoisted onto a mule and Appolonia Vaca, then 2 years old, rode in one bag, while the young Nestora Pena was the counterbalance in the other bag.

Probably little in the way of personal items was taken on this rigorous trek. The travelers took flour, hardtack, dried beef and salted, dried and pulverized buffalo meat packed in buckskin sacks. One hundred and fifty sheep were herded with the group to supply them with fresh meat, in addition to what fish and game could be gotten along the way.

Fortunately, much of the time there was water to be had along the route, but the real trial came in the Mojave Desert. Not only the lack of water, but the trail could only be found by following the carcasses of horses that had died in early crossings. The saline soil was so lacking of moisture that the horseflesh, rather than decomposing, had dried like the mummies of Egypt!

The party left New Mexico in September and reached Los Angeles in early November. Of this party, only the Vacas and Penas continued the 400 miles to Northern California, stopping at the missions in Santa Barbara, Monterey, and finally Sonoma.

The men left their families at the mission Sonoma and took off to Laguna Valley to build their adobes. They brought with them 25 Indian laborers they had picked up at the Santa Barbara mission.

The story has been passed down that Vaca and Pena built a temporary shelter on a hill east of Ulatis Creek. Perhaps they even built it in 1839 to establish their claim. This may have been the Vaca-Pena Wattle Dwelling Site. According to family tradition this was a house of "brush and twigs on an elevated spot overlooking the valley."

The pioneers viewing their land had quite a different sight than we get today. The valleys then were covered with a luxuriant growth of wild oats that often grew to the height of a horse's back. Shrubs and vines were abundant, and the valley floor was probably a dense thicket of grasses and small bushes as well. Colorful wild flowers would cover the valley come spring, and birds sang in every tree and bush. Of course, the many creeks and sloughs were full of fresh fish, wild game was abundant and the

grizzly bear flourished.

The Vaca-Pena land grant was vast, and they could have built their homes in a number of fertile spots. The Laguna Valley location was probably chosen for its proximity to nearby creeks and because of its welcome summer breezes.

The Vaca adobe was located on-third mile north of the Pena Adobe in Vaca Valley (from the Pena Adobe, the Vaca Adobe would be right across Interstate 80 and a bit north).

It was once described by Portia Hill as a long, low building, about 64 by 24 feet, with four rooms. The interior was plastered and whitewashed when she saw it. The rafters and joists were of rough timber. The front door had an upper and lower section. There was no covered porch.

By June 6, 1842, Vaca had met the requirement of building a house. As head of the Vaca-Pena partnership he petitioned for the "Lihuaytos" grant under Gen. Vallejo, a land grant of 10 square leagues, well over 44,000 acres.

Though Vaca and Pena built their adobes and ran cattle on the rancho, it was to be many years before their claim would be legally established. In 1843, a formal grant was issued, but it was soon discovered the boundaries overlapped the grant of John Wolfskill. In 1845, the dispute was settled in favor of Wolfskill and the reformed grant, still an astounding 44,384 acres, was somewhat less than the "Lihuaytos" grant. The new grant was called "Los Putos."

Still there were complications. With the Americans laying claim to California, it wasn't until June 4, 1858, and after great legal fees were paid, that Vaca and Pena were recognized as the legal landowners.

Luzena Wilson, who lived three-quarters of a mile from Vaca, recalled the life on the rancho in her memoirs.

Juan Manuel Vaca was the "lord of the soil," she said, "over which roamed cattle and mustangs. A whole day's hard riding about the grant would not reveal half the extent of their four-footed possessions."

John Wolfskill noted that Vaca and Pena were running 2,000 cattle and 200 to 300 horses.

Wilson recalled other "accompaniments of Spanish happiness. An army of vaqueros congregated every day about the settlement, smoked cigarettes, ran races, played

cards for high stakes, and drank bad whiskey in unlimited quantities. The man of position felt proud of his patrician blood, and condescended when he addressed his surrounding inferiors. He wore a broad sombrero, gold-laced jacket and wide bell-decked pantaloons girt his waist with a flaming sash, wore jingling at his heels, large clanking, silver spurs, swung a lariat with unerring aim, and in the saddle looked a centaur."

Two months after the Wilsons arrived Vaca invited them, with the aid of an interpreter, to attend a dance at his home.

"When we arrived at the adobe house," Wilson wrote, "the light streamed through open windows and doors far out into the night and revealed, tethered all about, the saddle-horses of the guests and lit up many black-eyed, smiling faces looking to see how the Americans would be received. Don Manuel with his daughter greeted us with all the ceremony and courtesy of a Spanish grandee and showed us to the place of honor. We were ushered into a long room, illuminated with tallow dips, destitute of furniture, with the exception of the two or three chairs reserved exclusively for the use of the American visitors. On either side were many mats, on which reclined with careless grace and ease the flirting belle and beau and the wrinkled duennas of the fiesta.

"The musical accompaniment to the dancing, which had already begun was played upon guitar and tambourine, and the laughing, chattering, happy crowd swayed and turned in wave-like undulation to the rhythm of a seductive waltz. They fluttered their silken vari-colored scarfs, and bent their lithe bodies in graceful dances which charmed my cotillion and quadrille-accustomed eyes.

"The young ladies were dressed in true Mexican costume; snowy chemises of soft fine linen, cut low, displayed the plump necks, leaving bare the dimpled arms; bright hued silk petticoats in great plaid patterns and shawls and of brilliant scarlet, set off in contrast their glossy, jet hair, their red lips, and their sparkling, tigerish, changing eyes.

"The men in holiday attire of velvet jackets of royal purple and emerald green, profusely trimmed with gold and silver braids, were as gaudy in color and picturesque in appearance as the feminine portion of the assembly.

"The refreshments comprised of strangely compounded but savory Spanish stews, hot with chilies, great piles of tortillas, and gallons of only tolerable whiskey. Near midnight they were served informally. Some of the guests ate reclining on the mats, some standing about the long, low table, some lounging in doorways and window-seats, all laughing, talking, coquetting and thoroughly enjoying the passing minutes, forgetful of yesterday, heedless of tomorrow, living only in the happy present.

“Among the prominent and honored guests were members of the most wealthy and influential Spanish families of the county. I remember well the pretty faces and manly figures of the Armijos, Picos, Penas and Berryessas.”

Wilson added, “I was always treated with extreme consideration by the Spanish people.”

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