

Family feud rocks Lagoon Valley settlers

By Kristin Delaplane

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Information for this article the second of two parts, came from "History of the Vaca Clan" by Jeff Paul; the Vacaville Heritage Council and the Vacaville Museum. In 1845, Vaca added to his household when he married Estefano Martinez. They had one child. The marriage didn't last.

Estefano left Vaca in 1852, taking with her the 30 head of cattle she came into the marriage with, plus the increase. Vaca was to encounter more problems.

Eventually portions of the Vaca-Pena land grant, Los Putos, were sold, as were portions of other land grants. Often along with these sales, towns would take shape.

Benicia was established in 1847 and is the oldest town in Solano County. Cordelia and Rockville were founded along the old stage road between Sacramento and Benicia. The road passed just east of the Vaca and Pena adobes.

In 1849, Vaca made his first sale of land, selling half a league between Alamo and Ulati creeks for \$8,000.

After this came the sale that led to the birth of Vacaville. On Aug. 21, 1850, Juan Manuel Vaca deeded 9 square miles of land (5,769 acres) to William McDaniel with a promise that a new town, 1 mile square (640 acres) would be established and named after Vaca. In return, Vaca received \$3,000 and 1,044 lots in town. It might be noted that McDaniel was a federal land agent and it was against the laws of the land for him to be involved in purchasing land.

Pena was furious. According to Maria Delores Vaca Pena, granddaughter of a Vaca-Pena union, it was the cause of the major quarrel between the two.

In response, Vaca deeded to "compadre" Pena a share of land equal to the 9 square miles. Apparently, this did little to appease Pena. Thus, it might be presumed the dispute had more to do with the town being named after Vaca, with the Pena name being left out.

Vaca also cried about the McDaniel deal. He said he had believed he was signing over only 1 square mile. Being illiterate, he had been at the mercy of an interpreter when he placed his "x" on the deed.

In May 1851, Vaca printed in the California Gazette, the newspaper in Benicia, a complaint that read: "Caution. I hereby notify all persons not to purchase any lands from William McDaniel, which he claims to have purchased from me under a title which he obtained from me under false pretenses, and I shall institute suit against him to annul the title so fraudulently obtained by him. Manual Baca." In many records "Vaca" is recorded as "Baca."

McDaniel sued Vaca for libel and the loss of a \$50,000 land sale. The case was in court by October 1851. The jury found Vaca guilty of libel the following day and fined him \$16,500.

The decision was appealed to the State Supreme Court, which ruled that Vaca's newspaper warning was something that "every freeman and freeholder would be justified in making if the circumstances raised a strong presumption that the fraud had been attempted upon him to get possession of his estate."

The high court decided that the original judgment should be reversed and that a new trial, at McDaniel's expense, should proceed. No further records of this litigation are recorded.

A census in 1850 shows only 12 Vacas in the immediate area. The clan was beginning to disperse as, bit by bit, the land grant of Los Putos was reduced in size and, perhaps, because of the feud.

In 1852, the feud between Pena and Vaca had reached such a furor the old friends maintained one lawyer jointly, but otherwise hired separate lawyers in their continued quest to have the land recognized as theirs legally. The legal fees for the years 1843 through 1858 to establish the legality of the land grant were paid in land.

No doubt short of hard currency, sale of the land was resorted to. To settle up their taxes, they turned large parcels over to the tax collectors of the day. Land was also sold to buy provisions. The Vacas were land rich, money poor and perhaps not the best managers of their resources. By 1879 most of the land grant was sold and by the 1880s, few of Juan Manuel Vaca's descendants lived on the rancho.

Juan Manuel Vaca moved after he and Pena argued over the William McDaniel land sale. This feud must have been bitter fruit indeed as these old compatriots shared family ties.

Another bit of folklore gives additional reasons for Vaca's departure. In the late 1840s and early 1850s a Pena and Vaca were involved in a murder; either a Pena killed a Vaca or vice versa. It was said that it was from that point that the Vacas began to leave

the area.

Jesus married Maria Anastasia Vaca. They exchanged vows at the Sonoma Mission. Maria died at a young age, leaving two small children. The children were raised by their paternal grandparents.

Maria Vaca married Gabino Pena in 1868. Neeves Pena married Miguel Vaca in 1876. John C. Pena married Louisa Vaca in 1883. Jose Seto Pena married Fidelina Vaca in 1887. Jose Jesus married Virginia Vaca in 1892.

At least three of Vaca's children were married at the Sonoma Mission. The young son he had by his second wife, Estefano Martinez, was baptized at 7 months on May 8, 1848, at the mission. The young son he had by his second wife, Estefano Martinez, was baptized at 7 months on May 8, 1848, at the mission. Three-month-old Jose Patricio Vaca, Juan Vaca's grandson, Juan Felipe Pena and his wife were named godparents of this grandchild.

Little is known about Juan Manuel Vaca after he left the adobe, other than that he may have settled near Putah Creek.

However, there is another story the Vaca clan tells: Vaca rode to Los Angeles to see the governor about this land dispute with his neighbor, and the governor granted him 1,000 acres near Davisville (Davis). Some Vaca descendants believe he settled there.

John Westley Hill, Portia Hill's father, purchased the adobe. Portia inherited it and was living there when it was destroyed by the earthquake of 1892. It was razed and replaced by a frame structure.

In the 1879 census, no Vacas are listed in the Vacaville Township. However, this may be because one had to pay to be included. Nevertheless, very few Vaca homesteads are listed on the maps of this time. One of the few mentions of the Vacas in later years is that Juan Manuel Vaca's grandson was arrested and sent to prison for killing the sheriff of Winters.

Besides having a town named after him, Vaca's legacy incredibly lives on in California's gold rush story. In 1840, a man made a remark that the existence of a pebble called "tepusete," indicated gold was in the area. Some months later, such a pebble was found and upon further examination of the soil, a bit of gold was uncovered.

It is said that Juan Manuel Vaca was the first to carry the news of gold to Gov. Alvarado at Monterey, presenting him with an ounce of gold contained in quills, from which was made a pair of earrings and a ring for his eldest daughter.

Vaca died in 1860, at age 73 or 74. His request was not to be buried on the land grant. Family tradition, however, has the patron's final resting place in the family plot that was part of the Thomas Foster Ranch. This was part of the Los Putos rancho, just northwest of Tremont Station.

This would have him interred possibly under Interstate 80 at the far end of Dixon, at the Kidwell exit.

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