

# Shipping built Maine Prairie; rail killed it

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What was the Maine Prairie Township lies about 10 miles southeast of Dixon and 18 miles northeast of Fairfield on Highway 113, the Rio-Dixon Road. Towns in the township were Maine Prairie and Binghamton.

Maine Prairie was first inhabited in 1859 when Capt. Merrithew and J.H. Utter settled at the head of the south bank of Cache Slough and opened a general merchandise business dealing in grain and lumber; locally grown grain was shipped out and lumber was brought in.

The next year, two men formed Deck & Co., a similar business, on the opposite side of the slough. In short order this became the destination for farmers to bring their grain for storage and shipping.

In the very beginning of the settlement, farmers attempted to cultivate the land, but the soil was largely marshland and proved unsuitable. So these farmers deserted their small dwellings for more fertile diggings. For a long time these homesites remained unlivable and fell into disrepair.

The unsuitableness of farming was more than made up for in the abundance of game for hunting; the marshes being ideal cover for antelope, deer, elk, rabbit, geese, ducks and quail. It was then recognized that this "unsuitable" land would profitably support cattle and sheep.

Sheep were first introduced to Solano County in 1852 by William Buck of Vacaville. He brought them in from Missouri. Many thousands of sheep were lost on that long trek, but Buck ended up with close to 3,000. By 1862, more than 130,000 sheep were being raised in the area successfully, including Maine Prairie. There were stock raisers from Connecticut, Scotland, Missouri and Virginia.

It was in the early 1860s that the spelling of "Maine" Prairie was decided on. Up to now, it was spelled Main and the old spelling is how the current-day road sign reads.

Cache Slough was a strong shipping port because it was navigable for small vessels and shallow-draft steamers drawing 10 feet of water. Thus the wharf, Maine Prairie

Landing, developed as the major shipping and trading point. Vessels soon came in carrying more goods: Coal, lumber and supplies for farmers. Locals shipped out hay, grain and stone from nearby quarries.

Maine Prairie shortly became the most important grain-shipping point in California. During the harvest season, farmers from miles away arrived in Maine Prairie town with large teams of horses and eight- to 10-mule teams pulling wagons full of grain.

A settlement of houses grew along with the town, providing services, stores and warehouses for grain and hay. The town plat was filed in 1861, reflecting 50 permanent residents. In 1862, four hotels were listed: The King Hotel, which was built in 1860; Cache Slough House; Fort Pinckney; and Fort Sumpter. Rooms were a dollar a night. There were three saloons, one being Hill's Saloon. A general store was built and a grocery store.

Early on, schoolhouses were built. One at Maine Prairie, one at an area designated Morning Light and another Enterprise School. The schoolhouses also served as churches, Sunday school being a big event in these early-day towns.

Then suddenly, Maine Prairie was hit by a major catastrophe when the big storm of 1862 came. This brutal storm raged, lashing out relentlessly. Ultimately a virtual seething sea beset the town center and beyond destroying everything in its path.

Merrithew was protected from total destruction because there was a barrier on his side of the slough, but most weren't so fortunate.

The tale passed down was that not even a stick was left behind to mark the spot where the town had been. It is certain the damage and loss was great.

For three days, water stood 12 feet deep in every direction. Businesses and merchants in the town suffered crippling losses. Farmers who had their hay and grain stored in the town's warehouses were devastated. The cattle and sheep ranchers were ruined when a great deal of their stock drowned in the churning flood waters. However, the pioneer folk of Maine Prairie were a hardy lot and determined not to be "blotted out." When the water subsided, the populace returned to rebuild.

Some people rebuilt on the original site, but this time they built on stilts. Others opted to build where the land was more elevated, on the Lewis Ranch. The widow Mrs. Rebecca Lewis, a Scot, laid out a new town plat on her land, which was about a quarter-mile from the old town site. She named the new town Alton. The town was settled but the name Alton never took hold.

The first business to be established in the rebuilding was a general store, followed by another and then a business dealing in grain and lumber, started up with a handsome brick store and large warehouse. At some point two swinging bridges were built across the slough. The comeback was a huge success.

On one day in 1863, it was recorded that 36,800 pounds of wheat were brought to the landing with one team pulling three wagons. This particular load was pulled a distance of 25 miles from a Putah Creek ranch. In that year, 50,000 tons of grain were shipped from Maine Prairie.

In following years, grain from all the valleys, north and west, was sent there. The amount shipped from this shipping port was exceeded only by Stockton.

Mrs. Lewis opened a hotel, the Maine Prairie Hotel, which she was still operating in 1877. A post office was established as was a branch of 000 . 0000.00the Western Union Telegraph Co. In 1865, the Protestant Methodist Church was organized. For some reason it failed within a year or two.

When the railroad began rolling in 1868, Maine Prairie saw signs of a bleak future. In fact, people's hopes for a thriving town were blasted with steam. Though some grain was still being hauled to Maine Prairie as late as 1914, most farmers now headed for the railroad stations.

But the town continued on, and in 1871 the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was formed at Maine Prairie Landing. But any prayers for the town's former prosperity went unheeded.

In less than five years only a few buildings remained: The hotel, one store, a blacksmith and three warehouses. A letter from Maine Prairie in 1875 went like this:

"I wish I could remain here the balance of my days. But it is not to be. I am preparing to take my departure. Farewell thou beautiful Maine Prairie. With tearful eyes, and heart I bid you "ajoo." No long will I be able to sail down the fair bosom of the peaceful water of Cache Slough, and buy fish from Chinese fishermen and on our return swear we ketched every one of them. Never again will I be able to stand all day long in three feet of water in tule during hunting seasons."

Reports at the time claimed the town looked old and haggard. The buildings went unpainted and became rickety, and dilapidated and a general air of "lonesomeness and desolation" pervaded.

Nevertheless, a great deal of life still breathed in the old gal. Maine Prairie School was

still operating and didn't close down until 1924. Mail was delivered three times a week. Records show that in 1878 and '79 the township was connected with the California PRR by a tri-weekly stage line. McKenney's District Directory in that time period records that landholders operating ranches numbered 76. With this much farming and stock-raising in the area, one can imagine what it must have been like in its true heyday.

There were a couple of brief revivals of sorts. There was some brief action in the area when the Oakland-Antioch electric railroad extended its line through Maine Prairie area to Sacramento and warehouses were built at the various stations. But eventually the stations were abandoned by the railroad.

In 1918, a group of Hindu Indians tried to grow rice in Maine Prairie. They planted 5,000 acres and pumped water from the slough into a ditch. This ditch called Calhoun Cut crosses Highway 113. They were successful in their attempt and had a good start at a bumper crop of rice. But they did not anticipate the cold nights and the heads of the grain never matured.

Eventually, Maine Prairie's town center simply ceased to be. Buildings were dismantled, the lumber used for building in other areas. Supposedly a barn on the Pocket Ranch is made from lumber from the Mrs. Lewis' hotel. Finally, Maine Prairie school was closed in 1924 and in 1925 the last building from Maine Prairie burned down.

Vacaville's increase in planting orchards up the hillsides affected the lay of the land in Maine Prairie. When the rains came, the water running off these cultivated hillsides and orchards carried soil into the creeks. Over the years, the Maine Prairie basin filled with soil, nature's landfill.

You can drive out Highway 113 and turn on Main Prairie Road and travel out to the slough. The town of Alton was located right at the end of this road. The town of Maine Prairie was at the corner of Brown and Bunker Station roads.

Binghamton was north of Maine Prairie. It is most noted in history for its army.

In 1863, a military company was organized to be called upon if needed for the Civil War. The regiment was named the Maine Prairie Rifles, and 72 men enrolled. The company built a brick armory in Binghamton approximately 35 by 50 feet and one story high.

The company met regularly for drills, target practice and picnics. It acted as a social arm of the community in bringing the scattered township together. After the Civil War

the armory became a public hall, store and later a school. It was torn down in 1950.

Binghamton established a post office in 1864. There was a school, and the M.E. church, a non-denominational Christian church, was organized in about 1865. Then Binghamton suffered the same fate as its sister town, Maine Prairie.

You can drive down Highway 113 to Binghamton Road and view the Binghamton Cemetery on the west side where the first pioneers were laid to rest. Unfortunately, the cemetery is closed to walk-in traffic.

Next week: The story of the Montezuma Township, followed by the story of the Green Valley Township.

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