

Water and wine fuel growth of Green Valley

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, July 16, 1995

Information for this article came from the Vacaville Historical Society, Vacaville Museum, Solano Genealogical Society and Fairfield Public Library. Green Valley was officially established in 1853, and as it became inhabited was described by a writer of the time as being almost a Garden of Eden:

"...Perfection as regards scenery. Bold, well-defined mountains and ravishing beauty of hill and glade, interspersed with wooded knolls and shady ravines. Residences placed in the midst of gardens with every color of flower and foliage imaginable, while on the hillsides appear acre upon acre of grapevines arranged to perfection. At the upper end of the valley are the famous Green Valley falls, which pour their murmuring waters into the stream after purling down the mountain sides in beauteous cascade."

Shady pools of water, high rocks and colorful wildflowers filled out the description.

Green Valley was originally part of the Soscol Land Grant. In 1848, the early settlers of the valley were John Stilts, W.P. Durbin and Charles Ramsey. These men and others soon discovered that the area was particularly well-suited for grape-growing, and the valley became noted for its bountiful harvests and quality wines.

The first house built was the stone house of the Swift family, erected in the 1850s. It is now headquarters of the Green Valley Country Club. Granville Swift was a member of the Bear Flag Revolt and reportedly the first to hoist the California Republic Bear Flag on June 14, 1846.

Another early-day arrival in Green Valley was John Volypka, an Austrian. He settled on his farm in 1858, planted his vines and built a wine cellar. Volypka's wine proved to be quite a profitable enterprise. By 1863, it was being shipped to San Francisco from Cordelia.

In 1860, Henry Shultz planted his vineyard. He and his brother formed the winery C. Shultz & Co. They built an enormous wine cellar, 38 feet by 100 feet. It was said to be able to house about 25 casks and, counting pipes and barrels, that the entire operation's capacity was about 10,000 gallons of wine.

Henry Brown was also a large producer of wine in the area, planting his vine in 1863.

It is not clear exactly when F.S. Jones arrived in the Green Valley. Some accounts have him arriving in 1860. Others in 1868. If he arrived as early as 1860, he first settled in an adobe that Gen. Mariano Vallejo built in the 1830s as a residence for his vaqueros.

Though remodeled a number of times, this house is known as the Vallejo/Jones House on Green Valley Road and is the oldest adobe in Solano County. Jones married Granville Swift's daughter and they moved into Swift's stone house.

Jones was destined to become the area's largest wine producer. He had all the necessary appliances and paraphernalia of the wine-making trade and constructed a cellar capable of holding 50,000 gallons of wine. He laid out 90 acres in vines, distilling 6,000 gallons of wine per acre.

But nature was to have her say. Disaster struck in the early 1870s when a plant root disease devastated the vineyards of Green Valley. Grapes continued to be harvested, but too many of the growers were never able to recover what they lost and so they went into other areas of farming such as fruit crops and took up stock raising.

One of Green Valley's pioneers was George Washington Mason, who arrived in 1850. He wore a silk hat and had a fine horse and buggy. Family lore has it there were very few days he wasn't drunk.

Mason settled in the area with his wife, Sarah, who had crossed the plains in a covered wagon. The husband and wife grew pears, plums, apricots, prunes and raised cattle on their 166 acres. Their passed-on remembrances of the valley were that peaches cost 4 cents a box, woodcutters lived in cabins in the woods and the surrounding hills were forested with chaparral.

George Dingley arrived in Solano County in 1850. He resided in Benicia at a boardinghouse and worked as a carpenter. Dingley was a bachelor and was to remain so all the years of his life.

In the year that he arrived in Benicia, Dingley is recorded as being given the power of attorney by a local resident, Josiah Knight. In 1852, he is listed as being the owner of two lots in Benicia. By 1853 he purchased 64 acres in Green Valley. He moved to the Valley and established a flour mill known as Dingley's Mill.

This was the first grist mill in Solano County. It was water-powered. Located at the headwaters of Wildhorse Creek, it utilized water from Green Valley Falls. Millard Meister worked at the mill and stated that he did various tasks including preparing a dam in 1853.

That first year of operation, wheat was ground in December, January, February and March. Then there was not enough water and the operation shut down until the water was again sufficient for the needed power.

The mill operated until the fall of 1857. At that point, Dingley moved a mile downstream to begin building a larger milling operation. The building of the second mill began in 1859.

Dingley contracted with a mason to build a "stone building 60 feet long, 40 feet wide and 31 feet high with walls for the first two stories 2 feet thick and walls for the third story with gale end, 18 inches thick." The price of construction agreed to was \$2,100. The structure was to be completed in a year.

Dingley set about building a dam about a half-mile from the site, laying a 12-inch diameter pipeline to bring the water down. By 1866, the use of the mill pond for water power was abandoned and the mill was equipped with more reliable steam power.

As the construction for the new mill proceeded, Dingley and the mason came to blows over money issues. The cause was due to changes in the original plans being put forth by Dingley. Dingley was a well-do man and could have easily paid the tab, but was also a very stubborn man when it came to money issues in particular.

The mason finally resorted to a mechanic's lien in 1860, instituting a lawsuit against Dingley. The litigation dragged on for seven years. The last document was filed in 1867 and there is no indication who won. But by that point in time, Dingley had already lost his mill due to other unforeseen circumstances.

Dingley was forced to abandon his mill through a foreclosure eviction notice in 1865. It seems when he originally purchased the land in Green Valley, the seller had failed to disclose a mortgage liability. When the mortgagee came after Dingley, he refused to pay, though, once again, he could have easily afforded the bill. He did manage to delay the loss of his land for two and a half years, but in 1865 his land and his mill were in the hands of another person.

The year before the final eviction, the great tragedy occurred. A number of visitors were at the mill inspecting the operation. A 17-year-old girl was leaning over one of the hoppers when her dress got caught in the slowly revolving shaft.

Not realizing the danger, she called to a nearby miller half-laughingly, "My dress is caught!" The miller cried out, "My dear girl, you will be killed." Orders were shouted to shut down the operation, but it was too late. Mary Eliza Parker lost her balance and was flung with great force, her head striking the cast-iron boxing of one of

the stones. Her poor mother, for her own safety, was restrained from running to her dead daughter.

In the next century, a ghostly legend of Mary Eliza Parker was created for the entertainment of Halloween goblins.

When Dingley was evicted, he promptly headed for Yolo County and set up another flour mill. He did not oversee its operation for too long. In September 1867, he passed away. Two months later, Dingley's mill was destroyed by a suspicious fire.

In 1879, a writer spent two days meandering through Green Valley Township. Arriving in Green Valley, the following information was filed in his story.

A Capt. S. owned 180 acres and had 10,000 grapevines planted. He was just preparing to plant 10,000 eucalyptus trees and was justly proud of his barberry hedge around his house and barn. It was probably the most extensive barberry hedge in the state of California.

The Charles Ramsey estate consisted of 1,000 acres, a stone mansion surrounded by a profusion of trees, flowers, shrubs and vines. Isaac Cros had 160 acres with wheat as his primary crop. He was also raising hogs.

The writer spent the night at the F.S. Jones house. The house nestled among overhanging oak trees was part of a 307-acre ranch laid out in grapevines and cherry trees.

The wine cellar was impressive. He had 30,000 gallons of wine on hand and 16 casks of brandy. He had planted 50 cherry trees in the 1860s to beautify the carriage drive to his house. Those trees were the beginnings of what was to become one of the largest cherry orchards in the world by the 1900s.

The next day, the wandering writer hiked to the Green Valley Falls, forested with dripping chaparral. The hike commenced on a wide path and then became a sheep trail. He happened up a vacant shanty along the way and a gentleman trolling for trout in the stream. The falls were described as "water shimmering down the facade of a solid wall of the mountain." The falls themselves were small as falls go, but the accompanying scenery was always described as most picturesque.

On the main road once again, there was a stop at the Beauferton Ranch, owned by Italians and devoted to viticulture. It was noted that wine from Belle Vista, the winery owned by Volypka, was shipped to Hamburg, Germany. But most of the wine was shipped to Milwaukee.

From this location, the view of the Green Valley was at its best. One could see the tules belting the bay and the water of the Suisun Bay. Beginning his descent, the writer passed the almond trees planted by Meister, the gentleman who had worked at Dingley's Mill. From that point, the mill was viewed with its walls of stone.

Leaving the valley, the writer noted the profusion of cherry trees along the route. Cherry orchards proved to be Green Valley's most successful crops in years to come.

Green Valley Falls is now part of the city of Vallejo's water system. In the 1850s and '60s, the residents of Vallejo were dependent on water from backyard wells and barrels that would catch rainwater. These methods were dicey depending on rainfall and pollution tables. Buying water by the barrel from water barges was an expensive alternative.

In 1870, Anthony Chabot formed a water company. The reservoir from that enterprise is called Lake Chabot and is adjacent to Marine World Africa USA. (It is used for water-skiing and boat shows now, and has no pollution problem.) It was soon apparent that Chabot's system delivered polluted water, but he and his partner refused to fix the problem.

Finally, in 1890, the city stepped in and voted to build a city water system. They ultimately located Green Valley Creek as a good source of non-polluted water. They negotiated and purchased the property.

Both Green Valley Falls and the Dingley mill ruins are inaccessible to the public. However, a drive up Green Valley Road takes you by some of the early-day residences, such as the Ramsey and Vallejo/Jones houses.

Next week: A look at Rockville Township and one of the more notorious counterfeiters of the era.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/516>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/516/>