Rockville grew into crossroads for early routes

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The village of Rockville in the Green Valley Township was located in the general vicinity where the Susuine Indians had previously located their head tribal village. The Indians called this place Yul Yul, meaning the place of the setting sun. When the white man’s disease, smallpox, hit in 1839, the tribe numbers were vastly depleted and the few surviving Suisunees left the area, many choosing the safety of the missions in Sonoma and San Jose. In later years Chief Solano returned to this sacred place, where he died and was buried.

The Old Fremont Trail established in 1841 for travelers to Sonoma, Petaluma and Fort Ross passed this very spot. It may be that the Indians, who were known to trade with far away tribes also followed this general route and, thus, Rockville, was on a designated travel route from the beginning. The present stretch between Rockville Corners and Green Valley follows the original configuration of the Fremont Trail.

Rockville became natural stops for the stage on the route to and from Benicia and Sacramento and the Pony Express. Beginning in 1849, hordes of gold-hungry miners passed by Rockville on their way to the mine fields.

One of the first residents in Rockville was John M. Perry. Perry was a blacksmith from Germany and in 1850 he opened one of the first blacksmith businesses in Solano County, locating it at the Rockville stage stop. He was to gain recognition in later years for inventing a rather crude plow that literally tore at the earth’s crust. But it effectively did the job and was marketed at a cost of $65.

Perry was followed by a few more pioneers who helped settle the area. The first order of business was to build a proper stage depot. Shortly after, a modest hotel was erected with an accompanying trading store to accommodate the stage traffic. As the place built up, more people selected this spot to call home and scattered dwellings appeared in this section of the Suisun Valley. Thus a small community developed.

One of those early-day settlers was Alford Landry. He prided himself on making his living as a hunter, selling elk and deer meat. Alford and his wife, Sarah, were part of an land traveling immigrant group bound for the Pacific Coast in 1846. A portion of that group split off and became the ill-fated Donner Party. The Landrys arrived in Sonoma in
time for Alford to serve under John Fremont in the Bear Flag Revolt, the uprising that succeeded in cutting California from Mexican control. Following that historic event, the Landrys settled briefly in Benicia. Then, as they became more familiar with their surroundings, they chose to resettle in the Rockville area, purchasing 300 acres.

In 1850 Samuel Martin, a Pennsylvania native, arrived in the Suisun Valley with his wife and four children. Prior to this, he had been living with his family in the gold fields where he had been moderately successful. However, determining that the gold mining towns were no place to raise children, in 1853 he bought 200 acres in the Rockville area. Chief Solano lived nearby and became his good friend. It was, in fact, Martin who, when the time came, would help bury the old Indian across the road from his home beneath a buckeye tree.

A cattle drive was responsible for the Martin’s expansive stone house. Samuel Martin set out on foot to St. Joseph, Mo., and returned with 660 head of cattle. Cattle were worth their weight in gold, so this was a financial boom. With the profit, he hired a German architect, German stone cutters and Chinese laborers to build his home in 1861. The Chinese laborers were paid one dollar a month. The home, an A-frame in American Gothic style, was built as three stories with 13 rooms. The stones were hauled by ox-wagon. Some of the stone came from the local quarry, but the cream colored variegated stone came from Contra Costa County. The home remained in the family until 1973. Martin, an exceptionally well-regarded man in the community, died in 1885 at age 73.

Christley Manka, was born in Virginia, and came out west to the gold fields where he prospered as a miner and storekeeper. In 1852, he came to the Suisun Valley and settled at a point that was an overland stage stop. His farm of 100 acres became known as “Manka’s Corner.” In time, accommodations were provided and a feather bed was comfort for the weary stage traveler headed for destinations such as Santa Rosa.

Prior to 1856 religious services were provided by traveling preachers. Suisun Valley Creek was a popular spot for revivals. Settlers from near and far brought their families, tents and cook stoves for a week’s stay. Some families were even known to bring their cows so as to have fresh milk. In the evenings, lanterns were hung in the oak trees and the sermons continued into the night.

It was in 1856 that the community decided to build a Methodist-Episcopal Church and connect it to the cemetery that had already been in use since 1851. Alford Landry donated five acres for the church and expanding cemetery. The tragic irony is that the Landry’s precious 3-year old daughter, Sarah, died that December at the time the first services were held in the stone church. Her grave marker can be seen to this day at the cemetery.
Rockville flourished as a major stopover for journeying businessmen and as a farming community. In time, a second hotel was built and a total of three blacksmiths were set up for business in the area. A schoolhouse was erected. The post office is recorded as being established in 1858. Then the railroad came to Solano County.

Like so many towns, Rockville felt the blow of the train whistle. The railroad marked the eventual end of the stage run and Rockville more or less became a deserted hamlet. Only a few locals remained in the village.

The congregation of the stone church found itself involved in controversy at the height of the Civil War. The minister at the time was a fierce advocate of Southern rights. Apparently he was chased out of town, but the issue of slavery spit the congregation. In 1863, most of the “Yankees” attended church in Fairfield. In the end, the stone church’s congregation dwindled to the point that it was seldom used. Actually, the Rockville church survived the Civil War issue better than other Methodist-Episcopal churches. The one in Dixon was burned to the ground.

Henry and Lewis Pierce arrived in Suisun Valley in the 1860s. The Pierce family was to become a renown and extremely wealthy family. The brothers, Henry and Lewis, came from Maine. Henry, born 1828, was the first to arrive in California traveling across the plains to California in 1850. His first venture was a cracker business in San Francisco, which was destroyed by fire in 1852. Lewis, who had arrived the year before in 1851 aboard a steamer, was apprenticing as a baker at the cracker factory. When it burned down, the brothers turned their attention to the increasingly profitable wheat business. Lewis moved to the Suisun Valley to build up the business in what was considered the best grain growing region of the day, Solano County. Brother Henry followed. The brothers amassed a fortune equalled by few in the country. The bulk of their business was exporting grain to England.

Lewis married Nellie Staples and they built a beautiful, palatial home on Suisun Creek in the 1870s. The only other home at the time that equalled the Pierce home in the valley was the Chadborne estate.

In 1895 news of the arrest of Giovanno Montelbano rocked the peaceful Suisun Valley. According to the secret service agent who tossed Montelbano in the Alameda County jail, he was one of the country’s most notorious counterfeiters. Certainly one of the most prolific counterfeiters on the West Coast.

“He has made and circulated more counterfeits of silver dollars, dimes and quarters in the past five years than any other ten operators combined,” stated Assistant Secret Service Agent Dudley Harris in the San Francisco Weekly Examiner.
Montelbano’s output was described as having a “true ring.” At that time the Pacific Coast had more “cunning bands of manufacturers of spurious coin” arrested here than anywhere else in the U.S.

Montelbano first showed up in Solano County in 1891 and outfitted a cave four miles northwest of Fairfield for his illegal activities. He worked in the cave by night and slept in a hut in the Suisun Valley near Rockville during the day. When the cave was discovered the Examiner described it “as a lonely spot in the rugged foothills, the entrance to which was so cunningly closed by the sod that there was no external evidence of its existence.” Giovanno took off his shoes before entering or leaving so there would be no footprints leading to the cave. He hauled the ashes from his makeshift furnace miles away.

The hideout was discovered quite by accident. A hunter fired a shot nearby startling Montelbano. He lifted his sod door and peeked out surprising the hunter. The hunter was able to flee and proceeded to tell his strange tale in the village. Agent Harris, getting wind of it, was able to ferret out the culprit. He called the find of the secret hideout, “the oddest thing ever unearthed by the government.”

Describing his find Harris reported that upon entering the cave, he had to step down four feet and then crawl about ten feet to reach the counterfeiter’s den. He then had to bend over to get in and crawl some distance in a cramped, narrow chamber to come upon the actual work area. There he saw the streaming tallow from many candles on the walls in the cavern. There were ladles, crucibles, pincers, reeding machines and a complete polishing outfit along with broken molds and several sacks of unfinished coins. The supply also included quantities of antimony, bismuth, block tin and isinglass. In other words, all the tools of the trade were on hand to produce a fine counterfeit coin.

After the establishment of the railroad towns, Rockville never regained its former prominence. But when a new trail was blazed, the American highway, Rockville would once again be chosen as a point along the trail.

A major landmark in the Rockville area today is the stone chapel and cemetery. The Pierce estate was located off Rockville Road across from what is now the deserted Iwana Market. The Iwana Market was formerly a barn on the estate grounds. On Suisun Valley Road across from the college stands the Martin-Suisun pioneer home. In modern times the house has been named “Stonedene.” Following Suisun Valley Road north from Rockville, you will come upon Manka’s Corner Road. If you follow that road, you will arrive at the famed Manka’s Corner, which today features a highly rated, popular deli frequented by the locals.

History events: The Martin-Suisun Historic Park, is currently in the planning stage, but
is forseen as a historic center for the Fairfield-Suisun area and as a representation of California Indian culture. It will occupy 3 acres adjacent to the stone mansion of pioneer settler Samuel Martin and is located on the former site of Chief Solano’s adobe. This ancient Indian site shows traces of a spring which attracted the Suisun Indians to settle there 4,000 years ago, over 100 bedrock mortars and a religious rock, a Cupule, which was probably a fertility stone. The center plans include a garden of native Indian plants, a display of Indian artifacts and of the early pioneer period and agriculture. Volunteers are sought to help make this plan a reality. Contact: 864-1305.

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