Wolfskill family set tone for Solano's future

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, August 13, 1995

Information for this article came from the Vacaville Heritage Council and the Vacaville Museum.

Wolfskill descendants can trace their story back to the 1740s Prussia and Frederick the Great's ongoing wars. Rather than fight in wars where the loss of life was incredibly high, in 1742, Joseph Wolfskeil moved to the wilderness of Pennsylvania to take his chances.

After settling, marrying and siring four children, he relocated his family to Boonesbourgh, Ky. His son, Joseph Wolfskill Jr., married and had 11 children, the first being William and the eighth, John Reid, born in 1804.

In 1809, Joseph Wolfskill Jr. moved his family to the wilds of Missouri, then a new territory. For brothers William and John, farming, livestock raising, trapping and hunting were second nature, necessary skills to acquire in these early pioneer days.

At age 23, William picked up and headed west. He landed in New Mexico, where he made his mark in the fur trade as an outstanding trapper. He also became a Mexican citizen, taking on the name Guillermo Guisquiel.

His skills were called upon as a leader and guide of a company of fur trappers who blazed a trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. One of his traveling companions was George C. Yount, who would later found Yountville in Napa County. The trail they etched was part of the Old Spanish Trail. They arrived in Southern California in 1831.

William Wolfskill became established in the region and pioneered the citrus industry in California. He would eventually own the world's largest orange grove of the day. In 1838, his brother, John, joined forces, helping him in the business of growing fruit. John would later be quoted as saying he was working for a "mere pittance."

Within a few years, John was yearning for a rancho of his own, and hearing of land around Putah Creek, he headed north in 1840 or 1841 on a scouting trip seeking fertile land he could call his own.

It was probably during this scouting trip that he stopped by George Yount's, though this recorded visit in one accounting is dated 1842. He got a fresh horse from Yount and

headed in an easterly direction. He rode into Green Valley, to Suisun Valley, past what is today Vacaville, finally arriving at the banks of Putah Creek. This area was a dense wilderness and teemed with wildlife, including mountain lions and the fearsome grizzly bears. Wolfskill wisely spent his first night wedged high off the ground in between two limbs of a sturdy tree.

Well-pleased with the area, Wolfskill tried to obtain a land grant for Rancho de Los Putas. But not being a Mexican citizen, Gen. Mariano G. Vallejo refused to recommend a land grant for Wolfskill.

Wolfskill traveled back to Los Angeles and tried once again to obtain a grant. With the help of Vallejo's son-in-law, Jacob Leese, Vallejo agreed to approve four leagues, or 17,754.73 acres, in the name of William Wolfskill, a k a Guillermo Guisquiel, a Mexican citizen. It was officially deeded May 24, 1842, by Gov. Alvarado.

To identify the boundaries of the grant, it was situated on both sides of the Rio de los Putos (Putah Creek) between what is today Vacaville and Winters. It started where Putah Creek flowed out of the canyon (approximately at the bridge where the Pleasants Valley Road now meets Highway 128) to the present town of Winters. Consequently, it shared boundaries with what is today Yolo and Solano counties; 8,880 acres were in Solano County.

John R. Wolfskill occupied the land immediately in 1842. A skilled backwoodsman, he was well-suited to the hardships he was to encounter.

Upon arriving at his "rancho," Wolfskill hunted for his food and built a pioneer "wattle" hut. His days were occupied clearing the land and shooting grizzly bears. He killed a large number, according to his own accounts. He often retold a story of shooting five grizzlies in the space of a mile and a half along the creek.

By September, a matter of a few months later, he had built an adobe with the help of a wandering Mexican or Indian. A common practice in establishing a first dwelling was to enclose the acreage by a ditch with a mound of brushwood heaped on top to protect the rising crops from wild animals. And Wolfskill did have crops from the beginning.

John Reid Wolfskill had purchased this land with the express purpose of growing. He came to his rancho laden with nuts and fruit seeds of every variety; the seeds of Solano's future. Figs, olives, walnuts, oranges, apricots and mission grapes. As soon as land was cleared, he planted his seeds and cuttings, carefully watering them with the fresh, clear water flowing from Putah Creek.

Wolfskill is on record as the first American, white settler in Solano County. His nearest

English-speaking neighbors were Sutter in Sacramento and Yount in Napa County. During the next few years, he would often break the solitude of his life by riding horseback to visit one or the other.

His other neighbors were Vaca and Pena. Wolfskill's grant was located at such a beautiful site that these land partners wanted it as part of their grant. To settle the matter, they took it by force.

This dispute went to court and, in 1845, it was decided that William Wolfskill would have his four leagues surveyed and that if the land along Putah Creek was so small that Vaca could not use it, William would buy the land from Vaca. But ultimately the U.S. Land Commission in 1854 confirmed William Wolfskill's original boundaries. In 1849, John's brother, William, transferred half of the Rancho de Los Putas to John for $5,000 and in 1856 the remaining half for $70,000.

John made several trips to Los Angeles, swimming his horse across the Carquinez Straits. On one such trip, he returned from Pueblo Los Angeles driving a 96-head herd of cattle. The future brand of the Wolfskill ranch that would be well-known in the area was "96." Always on his trips south he brought back with him seeds and cutting of new varieties of fruit, nuts and vines. Among these were an Eastern shell-bark hickory, pecans and a French Maderia nut. He also brought back two date palm seeds which by good fortune were male and female. These fruited the first commercial dates in the United States in 1877.

Wolfskill's early plantings proved fruitful indeed. During the Gold Rush, when all sorts of goods brought top dollar, fresh fruit sold for a dollar a pound in Sacramento. He was also able to capitalize on his cattle as dried beef was in high demand in the gold fields.

John's brother, Mathias, crossed the plains and arrived in 1850. Another brother, Sarchel, came west in 1852 via the isthmus of Panama with his wife, Margaret, and their small son. His brother Milton was the next to arrive. It is assumed John gave all his brothers land to cultivate and call their own, but the only written account located at present is the 1,200-acre gift to Sarchel. The brothers proceeded to enlarge on John's beginnings, planting commercial orchards and raising cattle.

Bit by bit, other pioneer settlers made their home along Putah Creek, and by 1852 there was a substantial grouping of people spaced three to 10 miles apart. The main settlement was Silveyville, which began as a simple way station for miners operated by Elijah Silvey. Another early-day resident along Putah Creek was Dr. O.C. Udell, a pioneer physician.

In later years, "Uncle John" Wolfskill, as he was known to the locals, was recognized

as the "father of Solano County's Orchards." He encouraged many early residents of Pleasants Valley to cultivate grapes and fruit trees. These early settlers bought land from Wolfskill, and he provided them with fruit tree cuttings, know-how and even loaned them tools. In 1851, he provided M.R. Miller of Pleasants Valley with plant cuttings. Another account tells of Sarchel's orchard selling 124,000 olive cuttings in one season.

At the start, the brothers built and occupied a log house a few feet away from where the adobe was standing. The adobe was used as a storehouse and later as a blacksmith shop for many years. Finally it was pulled down, the earth in its walls used to strengthen the banks of the encroaching creek.

Mathias' first home was an adobe on the south side of Putah Creek, a half-mile east of Winters. Mathias Wolfskill moved to a 700-acre ranch near Mankas Corner in 1866. Milton's house was seven miles west of Winters and was actually outside the rancho grant.

The next house John Wolfskill built was a frame dwelling in a modern style. This he built at some expense, as timber was not easily procured. He had the timber hauled from Benicia, a distance of some 40 miles. This cost him 12 cents a foot and the driver of his team and wagon cost him $16 a day. Next, John would build a stone house, and Sarchel occupied the frame house.

For a time, John found companionship with Carmalita Tapia. They had a son, Edward, but the couple were never married. In about 1860, John married Susan Cooper of Benicia, and he began clearing out dense foliage in a choice location to build their estate on the Putah Creek.

In 1864, he put the finishing touches on a two-story native stone house. The smooth stone was recorded to be on the property, and historians have ascertained it was likely quarried from hills east of Monticello Dam on Putah Creek. An avenue of olive trees planted in 1861 provided a magnificent entry to the mansion. The home was about 300 yards from the banks of the creek and surrounded on every side by orchards of fruit trees. The couple, who had three daughters, would call this home for the next 28 years.

It has been recorded that John's son, Edward, was given a homestead on the property and became his father's business manager. It has also been noted that his mother, Carmalita, was forbidden to set foot in Susan Cooper Wolfskill's home.

That stone residence was destroyed by the 1892 earthquake. Wolfskill sent a telegram to Arizona to inform a friend. The message read "no one hurt by earthquake; house total wreck." At the time, Wolfskill was 88 years of age.

His daughter, Frances Wolfskill Taylor, undertook building a replacement. It was a 17-room mansion said to be fashioned after the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. It had an interior courtyard and the "96" brand was placed over the entrance. This would be the Wolfskill headquarters of Rancho de Los Putas from 1892 to 1948, when it was destroyed by fire.

John Reid Wolfskill lived in the home for the next five years. He was now a famed fruit grower in the area, known to all. He was a man of wealth and enjoyed a fine reputation. He died in 1897 at age 93.

Edward had a daughter, Aldanita Wolfskill, who became a famous opera star. In a brief write-up in the San Francisco Call, it was noted that she received her education at San Francisco's Irving institute and then studied in Berlin, where she made her debut at Beethoven Saal in 1912. The critics made flattering comments about her vocal gifts. She went on to appear at the Panama Canal Celebration in 1913 and the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915.

In 1916, the San Francisco papers announced that she was forsaking the operatic stage for the farm - that the "back to the land" call had been ringing in her ears. Convinced she would make money farming, she signed a lease with an option to buy a piece of the homestead, including orchards.

In her father's memory, Frances Wolfskill bequeathed 107 acres and the mansion to the University of California, Davis, in 1934 to be used as an experimental farm. In 1966, it was commemorated as State Historical Landmark No. 804. Those gnarled olive trees that led to Wolfskill's mansion can be seen to this day by driving 1.6 miles west of Winters on Putah Creek Road.

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