

## **Vacaville thrives on ranching and farming**

**By Kristin Delaplane**

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Information for this article came from the Vacaville Heritage Council.

Vacaville Township was approximately 66,790 acres, comprised of mountains, valleys and plains, and reputed for having some of the finest soil in the county.

The boundary line ran north to Putah Creek covering the eastern slope of the Vaca Mountains. Mount Vaca's elevation was 2,870 feet above sea level.

The fertile lands of the Pleasants, Vaca and Lagoon valleys were favored with good water resources.

Sweeny and Ulatis Creeks flowed to Maine Prairie, emptying into the Cache Slough. Alamo and Pleasants Valley Creeks flowed to Putah Creek.

The English Hills were crisscrossed with many natural trenches, the borders lying on Putah Creek and breaking at Vacaville. To the east and south were the fertile plains.

Manuel Vaca and Juan Philip Pena were the first settlers in the area, in 1841, and they built their adobes in the Lagoon Valley. Their joint land grant, Los Putos, was a vast 44,000 acres and provided rich grazing land for cattle, the pioneers' principal means of livelihood.

As was the custom of the day, the cattle and mustangs were free to run and feed at will. However, the animals could rarely be seen as the uncommonly rich oats grew extraordinarily high. The first settlers often told tales that a man on horseback could reach the standing oats and tie them together over his head while seated in the saddle.

John Wolfskill arrived in 1842 and began planting fruit trees and vines. Around 1846, Lyon, Patton, Willis and Long, all stock-raisers, settled in the area. A smattering of others followed.

Not all was peaceful during these times. In 1848, two settlers, Hollingsworth and Newman, set out for the gold mines. On their way they were murdered, the record says, by Indians. The bodies were discovered by neighboring settlers and the two were properly buried.

In 1849, more families are documented as locating in the area and a small farming

community was developing.

Manuel Cabeza Vaca deeded nine square miles to William McDaniel in 1850 with the provision that one mile square be established as a town named after Vaca. Vaca was also to receive \$3,000 and 200 of the 1,055 lots in the town.

McDaniel immediately turned around and deeded half interest in the tract of land to L.B. Mizner, and together they laid out a town site called Vacaville. Main Street was set out along Ulatis Creek.

Some years later there was a move to rename the town Ulatis, but Vacaville it remained.

McDaniel erected the town's first building. It is recorded that as early as 1850, the Masons and Odd Fellows organized their groups.

The second building to go up was a hotel built by James McGuire. About 1853, E.F. Gillespie started a store in a small tool house owned by Mason Wilson. He later moved the store to a stone building.

In 1851, about 3,000 sheep were brought in from Missouri. It is said these were the first sheep in California. Cattle remained dominate in the area, but sheep-raising existed for a time.

Most of the area's ranchers followed the economy in determining the commodity they would deal in. In the early years, cattle-raising prevailed. This gave way to grain production, and by the 1880s fruit became the township's strongest commodity.

Also in 1851, J.M. Pleasants located in what he named Pleasants Valley. He often recounted tales of the days when he first arrived.

The valley that was "home of vast herds of wild animals, such as elk, deer, grizzly bears, California lions and wolves," he said.

"I have counted 100 deer in a short day's hunt," Pleasants recalled. "One afternoon, I saw 11 grizzly bears in two miles travel." Pleasants lived in a tent for the first year, hunting bears and deer for the Sacramento market.

John Wolfskill, his neighbor, encouraged him to plant fruit trees and sold Pleasants cuttings and plants and shared his knowledge. Pleasants' first plantings were apricots, apples and pears in 1852. He built a log house and over time became one of the most prosperous ranchers in the area with more than 1,050 acres planted in orchards,

vegetables and grain.

In 1852, a number of families moved to in the Vacaville Township and the settlement was beginning to flourish.

Edwin (Charles) Markham was born in this small settlement in 1852. He would become a well-known poet, famed for "The Man with the Hoe" (1899), a poem of protest against the exploitation of labor. The poem was to earn him more than \$250,000 during his lifetime.

The year 1852 also marked the first recorded death in the city when James McGuire died. It was stated he owned a house of entertainment in the village.

The Christian Church was organized in 1855 with 11 members. It was located in a grove at the Oilar family farm. By 1874, membership had grown to 200 and the building was moved to town.

The California College was started by Professor Anderson of San Francisco in 1855 as a private school. In 1858, the original wood-frame building was replaced with a 50-by-80-foot brick building.

Another construction was a brick boardinghouse for the female staff, and other houses were built on the grounds for males. It was situated on the south side of Ulatis Creek.

In 1856, M.R. Miller settled in the Vaca Valley and planted an orchard of peaches, apples, figs and Mission grapes. Miller was perhaps the first to grow his crops commercially.

He grafted Mission vines into Muscat grapes and loaded his fruit into a four-horse wagon and made selling trips to the gold mines. He frequently was able to get 50 cents a pound for his fruit.

In 1863, he tried shipping Muscats in cork dust to New York via Panama. The grapes did not arrive in an eatable condition.

Names like Thissell, Thurber, Putman, and Cantelow were soon charted on the census rosters and were among the first in California to grow fruit commercially.

Meanwhile, downtown Vacaville evidenced some growth in 1858 when Mason Wilson built a hotel. It was not his first experience as an innkeeper.

When he and his wife, Luzena, first arrived in the area, in 1852, they stopped their

covered wagon in the midst of an oat-covered plain and Luzena set out a sign, "Wilson's Hotel."

Mason set to harvesting wild hay, which was then selling for \$150 a ton in San Francisco. Weary travelers, many traveling to and from the gold fields, welcomed Luzena's camp-

fire-cooked meals and the comfort of a haystack provided by the innkeepers.

By the end of the year, the couple bought lumber in Benicia and moved from their prairie "hotel."

In 1853, Luzena was ready to entertain and invited five guests for Christmas dinner. She served onion soup, roast elk and lamb, boiled onions, radishes, lettuce, parsley, dried apple pie and rice pudding.

Around 1861, Rev. J.C. Stewart received a substantial endowment from the people of Solano for the Pacific Methodist College. He located in the old California College.

About 1864, the building burned down. A tent was pitched for the rest of the term, and the following term was carried out in the boardinghouse until a brick building, 60 by 90 feet, was completed in 1866 at a cost of \$25,000.

The new building was constructed on an elevation of land overlooking the town. That site today is Andrews Park.

In 1871, the college relocated to Santa Rosa.

During the first years of commercial growing, the fruit farmers found a good market in San Francisco.

The English Hills and Vaca Mountains protected the valleys from winds and coastal breezes, allowing the area's fruit to ripen earlier than at any other location in California. Therefore, the pears, peaches, and apricots of the Vaca Valley fetched a high price as the first fruit of the season.

Due to the rich soil, the area produced a high-quality fruit, so it wasn't long before the Vaca Valley gained fame for its luscious crops.

There was a leveling off in production in the 1860s when supply matched demand. Expansion was halted, but fortunately a healthy, expanding fruit industry resumed with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, which enabled growers to ship

fresh fruit to markets as far east as the Rockies and central plains. It was that same year that the railroad added a branch line from Elmira to Winters and a train station was established in Vacaville.

As early as 1866, fruit growers in the Vaca and Pleasants valleys employed Chinese labor to cultivate and harvest fruit. It has been documented that many Chinese arrived in this country with scrolls that contained information on the planting, pruning and packing of fruit. The industry owed a great deal of its success to the knowledge they brought from China.

Next week: The town of Vacaville grows with substantial businesses as it becomes renown as one of California's fruit-growing capitals.

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