

Town gains fame as fruit-growing capital

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Second of two parts

Vacaville was the birthplace of another man of note. The famed botanist, Willis Linn Jepson, was born in Vacaville in 1867.

Jepson pursued botanical studies at Cornell and Harvard, Kew and Berlin and was eventually made a professor of botany at the University of California in 1919. A redwood tree he planted stands today in front of the family home at Cernon and Main streets.

In the 1870s, the town of Vacaville could boast a general merchandise store, three fruit companies, three blacksmiths, two butcher shops, two banks, three cigar stores, three doctors, three packing sheds, two stables, a hardware store and a lumber company.

An Italian colony of fruit growers arrived in the 1870s, establishing homes and orchards in the English Hills. Prior to their arrival, the English Hills was thought to be best suited for cattle and sheep raising.

The location was named after Sacramento attorney and judge James R. English. He had acquired the land in lieu of legal fees. He never settled there and until he sold some of the land to the Italians, herds and flocks of cattle and sheep grazed freely.

The McKevitts arrived in 1877, starting a fruit ranch. Within 10 years they had expanded and were one of the leading growers in the area. They also established a thriving shipping business.

Grapes had proved a central part of the fruit-growing industry, but prospects were severely damaged when the vines in Pleasants Valley became diseased and the disease progressed southward, destroying many vineyards.

With this, many fruit ranchers replaced vineyards with fruit trees and vegetables, and soon orchards dominated the local scene. But some farmers replanted grapes and the Vaca Valley was still known for the growing some of the sweetest grapes.

The Tokay became the grape of choice in time, as it had proved to be the most

disease-resistant.

The Vaca grape grower did not stake his vines, allowing the grape bunches to grow along the ground. Because of the dry climate, there was no danger of mold or decay.

In 1876, a freight car of local grapes was shipped express to the exposition at Philadelphia to advertise Vacaville's fine fruits. At this time, ice blocks were just beginning to be placed in the center of the car, an early forerunner to the refrigeration car. The grapes received high praise.

During this time, the township showed more signs of growth. The Baptist Church organized in the chapel of the California College with 17 members.

In 1874, Wilson sold his hotel to E.S. Davis, whose brother, J.F. Davis, operated it as the Davis Hotel.

A series of lectures by B.A. Stevens resulted in organization of the Church of Seventh-day Adventists in 1877 with a congregation of 50 to 60 people.

That same year, 1877, the town suffered from two fires. The first destroyed close to half the business district. The second one almost wiped out the town. It was reported that within two years the town was completely rebuilt.

By the mid-1880s, Vacaville's business district ran from Depot Street to Dobbins Street, with businesses on both sides of Main Street. When the rains came, the road was a mire of mud and it was not uncommon for carriages and small wagons to get stuck and break down.

The businesses had grown to include two blacksmiths, two laundries, three general stores, two draymen, two cobblers, a hotel, a boardinghouse, two notaries public, six saloons, two painters, a druggist, dentist, saddler, undertaker, butcher and livery.

There were three churches and seven fraternal orders. The Vacaville Reporter first set type in 1883. The town was described as being neat and full of life and energy.

During the 1860s and '70s, the rural, one-room schoolhouse flourished. Schools were located in Vaca Valley, Pleasants Valley, English Hills, Browns Valley and Lagoon Valley. Reading, writing and arithmetic were the mainstays.

In 1885, the Ulati grade school was built in town. In 1898, the high school was completed.

Up to this time, the fruit industry had been profitable, but beginning in the 1880s, things took off like a shot as more people realized the profit to be made. The real estate market boomed.

Nevertheless, land here remained relatively affordable. The highest price paid by 1912 was \$600 an acre, the low end being about \$250 an acre. It was not long before orchards covered the entire landscape in the valleys.

It was recorded in 1880 that the train from Vacaville was hauling fruit daily during harvest season.

During the harvesting season, the population around Vacaville could increase by many thousands, with men, women and children working side by side.

Because of the high prices Vacaville could demand with its early fruit, farmers could afford to ship to eastern markets on the fast passenger trains. This was soon to change in favor of the farmers, as technology in refrigeration progressed.

Vacaville's farmers realized an even greater profit margin when they could ship to the eastern markets on the cheaper freight trains that provided refrigerator cars.

In the 1880s, Frank Buck was the first to ship fresh fruit back East and he was also the first grower in the state to ship by refrigeration car. By the 1890s, confidence was such that other growers followed suit.

L.W. Buck established the Buck Co. and was the undisputed leader in the fruit industry. Leonard W. Buck arrived in 1873. In 1875, he purchased 156 acres in the Vaca Valley and planted peaches. A man of capital and business acumen, by 1880 he was the most successful fruit grower in the area. His son, Frank, took over the business in 1881 and was equally successful. In 1882, L.W. Buck was elected to the state Senate. By the end of the century, the Buck family was the largest shippers in the township.

Vacaville's growers were renown for pioneering the development of new fruit varieties. The seasonally early fruits and vegetables were the farmers' mainstay. Always able to put fruits and vegetables on the market a month or two before other areas, they could command remarkably high prices.

But growers constantly experimented to develop crops that would ripen at different times in order to extend their selling season. For instance, 10 varieties of peaches were developed, enabling the farmers to send peaches to market from May through October. Some of the new varieties were named after their creators, such as the McKevitt Heath and McKevitt Cling peaches and the Thissell Seedling apricot.

By the 1890s, all the available land in the Vaca, Lagoon and Pleasants valleys was planted with orchards and vineyards, even extending up the crests of the rolling hills above the valleys. It was estimated that 15,000 acres were fruit lands. On average, the ratio was 100 trees per acre.

One can understand why it was stated that a more picturesque landscape was not equaled in the state. Come spring, cherry, peach, plum and pear trees made a flowery showing giving the viewer a breathtaking panorama.

But growing was by no means restricted to orchards in the Vacaville Township. In the extended Vaca Valley, the orchards gave way to vast fields of grain. Planted south and east of the town of Vacaville, thousands of acres of fertile land were devoted to the growing of hay, alfalfa and clover as well as commercial vegetables.

Disaster struck downtown once again. By this time, the Chinese community had established a downtown area of their own that prospered, with stores and services and dwellings for a mostly male population.

In 1888, a major fire destroyed most of the Chinese district. And shortly after, another fire destroyed much of the business district. Rebuilding was the only option.

The fruit industry was rapidly expanding and farmers and ranchers were basking in their prosperity, so along Main Street, speculators, merchants and civic organizations began erecting large masonry buildings suited to the Victorian era.

Then the earthquake of 1892 bounced the town structures around, causing much destruction. The Pleasants family reported that the quake bounded their home off the foundations; that an aftershock a few days later bounced it back where it belonged. It has been estimated that the quake would have measured 6.4 on the Richter scale. Along with the repairs to be made, Main Street was finally paved and concrete sidewalks replaced rickety planks.

In May 1892, editors from back East representing the National Editorial Association arrived for an hour-and-a-half visit. Vacaville had been selected as the best place to represent deciduous fruit-growing in California.

Everyone in the township turned out for this historic event. An arch was erected at the Main Street bridge for the visitors to pass under. It was draped and festooned with flowers, and the whole town was a show of banners and streamers. An abundance of carriages and wagons conveyed the visitors through the valley past the orchards. One such wagon was decorated with fruits and flowers.

Structures such as the I.O.O.F. Hall and the Triangle Building were erected in 1896. A group of prominent citizens made up of ranchers, merchants and professional men organized the Ulatis Club for the purpose of playing pool and cards in a setting other than the local saloon.

Little did the township know that 1896 would mark the beginning of a four-year drought. Fruit production dropped by more than one-half within two years. Fortunately, that still allowed for a tidy profit.

One important product was dried fruit. The export of dried fruit was widespread to markets in Europe and the Orient by 1897.

At the turn of the century, the population was 1,220. And the good news was that Vacans could begin the next century with a downpour, as the drought came to an end and the township would soon regain their status of producing half of California's deciduous fruit.

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