

Making history as female fruit rancher

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Monday, January 15, 2001

Fruit ranching drew many people to the Vacaville area during the 1880s. While the majority were men, a number of women also became known as successful fruit growers.

The most well-known female fruit rancher at the time was Mrs. Elise (also spelled Eliza) Pierson Buckingham, who came to Vacaville in 1884.

Born on April 24, 1834, in Genessee County, N.Y., as the twelfth of 13 children, Elise married Thomas Hugh Buckingham, after his first wife, Eliza's older sister Harriet, died in 1854.

The couple moved to Janesville, Rock County, where Thomas Buckingham opened a business as a "manufacturer of Gentlemen's extra fine French Calf and Patent Leather Boots and Shoes."

Sometime after the birth of their son, Thomas Hugh Buckingham Jr. in 1859, the family moved to San Francisco, where Thomas Buckingham continued his business as a shoe manufacturer.

Not much is known of the Buckinghams until the San Francisco Chronicle of Jan. 1, 1880, listed under the legal decrees of separation granted during 1879: "Buckingham, Eliza P., From Thomas W.; adultery."

Several years after her divorce, in 1884, Eliza P. Buckingham decided to purchase 400 acres of land, half of it planted to pears, figs, walnuts and vines, from Jose Demetrio Pena in Lagoon Valley. While she initially intended to resell the land for profit, she soon decided to plant more orchards so as to provide a future for her young son, Thomas Jr. Called Lagunita Rancho, this land would be her home until her death in 1915.

Four years after this acquisition, in 1888, she proved her talent for business by purchasing 1,000 acres of the so-called Butcher Tract, located near Vacaville. Elise Buckingham renamed the area Ariquepa Rancho, subdivided half of the land into smaller parcels and organized an auction sale on April 21, 1888. The proceeds of this sale surpassed the sum she had paid for all of the land.

An article in the San Francisco Chronicle on Jan. 26, 1895, recaptured that most of the

buyers were “young men and women, mostly from Holland and England. One New York City girl owns 42 acres of her own, planted to trees, and manages 80 acres in addition for relatives as well as any man in the county would.”

The Vacaville Reporter wrote a few years later, on Jan. 13, 1894: “The Bulletin of Saturday has a column interview with Mrs. E.P. Buckingham, which is of interest especially to ladies. Mrs. Buckingham did what none of our capitalists of the sterner sex dared to do. She bought the 1,000 acres of the Butcher tract and subdivided it, so that now it is becoming a place of suburban homes.”

A city girl herself, Elise P. Buckingham quickly learned everything she needed about fruit ranching. By 1888, she ran her farm herself without the assistance of a ranch manager. In that same year, Edward J. Wickson described her operation in his publication California Illustrated No. 1. as: “the greatest horticultural achievement in Lagoon Valley ... It is the most notable example of woman’s work in California fruit growing, and it is the more interesting because its executor was left with the property on her hands and thus forced in its manipulation, but taking her own cash capital she moved forward into horticulture with due deliberation, believing that she could thus build up a pleasant and profitable business enterprise.

“There are in California horticulture other instances of successful work by women among those who have deliberately taken up the business, but we believe the undertaking in Laguna Valley is by far the greatest, in view of the capital invested and the magnitude of the operations undertaken.”

An article in the Vaca-ville Reporter on Aug. 29, 1889, sheds some light on Elise Buckingham’s management philosophy on how to realize top prices for her products: “It will do one good to take a trip to Ariquepa Rancho these days of fruit handling and take observations. At present a large acreage of grapes are being picked, packed and shipped east in refrigerator cars. Mrs. Buckingham is exercising wisdom in having nothing but the finest grapes that can be found shipped, and the quality is so exceedingly fine, that even a thorough winnowing doesn’t result in the rejection of many...”

Elise Buckingham was also well known for her strong views on women’s roles and rights. Edward Wickson recognized her efforts, writing that “women tire sometimes of the exactions of society or grow restless in the bonds of conventionality. She knows also that upon women devolves the duty of investing money or employing energy so that returns may be had for those dependent on them, and how often the usual investments prove unremunerative if not delusively, and how crowded are the ranks of vocations conventionally considered women’s work. Herein we have a key to some of the thoughts which Mrs. Buckingham cherishes; to lead women to recognize their own

ability and strength, to lead them to action rather than restlessness or repining, to demonstrate that a woman can succeed in horticulture, even when the affair is extended and complex and great interest involved, to add perchance a single scintillation to the light which California throws forth to cheer and welcome those who have force enough to do and dare for the promotion of their won welfare.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that Elise Buckingham was involved in the presentation of the first and only speaker on suffrage in Vacaville in 1911!

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