

Jewish family among Vaca's early settlers

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Monday, January 29, 2001

While many ethnic and religious groups came to California during the Gold Rush era, Jews made up a surprisingly small number among them.

Increasing anti-Semitism and economic hardships in Europe led many Jews to migrate to America, but most settled in large cities on the East Coast. Jewish culture depended largely on a closely-knit society, which could more easily be found in the cities.

The same pattern can also be found among those that ventured on to California. By 1851, only 200 Jews lived in Sacramento. A decade later, in 1860, their number had barely doubled to 500.

At the same time, the Jewish population of San Francisco numbered more than 5,000.

Most of these newcomers were men, typical for the early settlement years. Jewish families were few and even fewer outside major urban centers. It is therefore surprising to find a Jewish family among the early settlers in Vacaville.

In 1853, Moses Blum arrived in Vacaville. He had been born in Alsace, at that time a part of France, in 1830. Together with three brothers, he made his way to California around Cape Horn in 1849. He settled in San Francisco, where he met and, in 1853, married then-17-year-old Bertha Koschland, a recent German emigre.

During that same year, Moses and his two brothers opened a general store in a stone building on block 20 of downtown Vacaville, which they had purchased from E.F. Gillespie.

Their advertisement "For Goodness Sake Don't Say I Told You That M. Blum, Vacaville, Cal., Keeps the Largest and Finest Stock of General Merchandise In The County!" became a well established feature in the Vacaville Reporter.

The business also gave credit and loans to cattle ranchers and fruit growers, at one time reportedly carrying \$50,000 of receipts for the Pena and Vaca families alone.

The Blum brothers also handled fresh and dried fruit for local growers and, in the next generation, established a flourishing shipping business.

The coming of the railroad in 1868 offered exciting prospects for Vacaville's citizen. They finally saw their chance to reach larger markets and made every effort to have the town connected to the California Pacific Railroad system.

On April 10, 1869, the Weekly Solano Herald reported that prominent citizens "Mason Wilson (President), Richard Thompson (Secretary), A.P. Bernard (Treasurer), A.C. Hawkins, G.B. Stevenson, William B. Davis, G.F. Barker, E.R. Thurber, Joshua Donaldson, M.R. Miller, Thomas J. Jeans and Moses Blum were last Saturday elected Directors of the Vaca Valley Railroad Company. ... "

Blum remained a director for several years and seems to have been very successful in his enterprises. During the period from 1863 to 1874, the Suisun City newspapers listed affluent farmers, merchants and orchardists, nicknamed "Nabobs," with an assessed income of more than \$10,000. Twenty-eight Vacaville resident fell into this category, among them Jacob and Moses Blum.

It remains unclear whether the whole family, consisting of Bertha, Moses and eventually eight children, actually lived in Vacaville during their early years of marriage. They certainly did so by the year 1869, when their fourth child, Max, was born here on June 12.

In 1886, Moses Blum handed his business enterprises over to his two oldest sons, Jacob and Isador, and retired with Bertha to live in San Francisco.

Sometime in the late 1950s, the youngest daughter Edna, born in Vacaville on Jan. 4, 1878, remembered life in Rosedale Cottage, the family's house at the corner of Merchant and Main Street. Her descriptions recaptured vividly the comfortable lifestyle of the late 19th Century. "Some of my fondest memories are of our home in Vacaville.

"The dining room was ... the center of family activities. Opening into the dining room were three doors. One entered from the front porch ... One led to the kitchen - the domain of Ling, the Chinese cook. ...

"The dining room itself contained - beside the table - the sideboard ... the couch under the window, and a small marble-topped table where a silver deposit pitcher stood - always filled with ice water for father's sake. ...

"My mother and father often played pinochle at the dining room table...

"At the same table ... we often sat at night and shelled and ate shrimps that my father brought home from his trips to San Francisco. On the train coming back one day, he wondered why people moved away from him. The mystery was solved when he

realized that he had Limberger cheese in his grip.

"The house originally consisted of three or four rooms and we jokingly used to say that a room was added each time a child was born. The house was bought from Spanish people named Pena. ...

"There was a large garden surrounding the house. In the front there were fig trees under which we had hammocks and lounging chairs. I remember especially a eucalyptus tree where I buried dead birds when I found them. In the side gardens were oleanders, rose bushes and other flowers. There was a stable yard and a barn with a horse and a cow. Opposite the kitchen there was a wash house. I can remember cheese maturing on the roof. Beneath was a cellar where we could go on hot days to escape the heat. ...

"A few years ago I made a visit to Vacaville, hoping to see the old house, but it had been torn down and replaced by something else. The town itself had grown very much. It still had the main business street, which is surrounded by very fine fruit orchards. There is now a penal institution there and the town is barely recognizable as the Vacaville of my early years."

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/55>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/55/>