

Indian trails transformed into highway

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, September 15, 1996

In the days when the Indians lived on this land of Solano County, they lived as gathers and traders. Their trade routes were well-established, allowing for trading between the coastal Indians and the inland groups. The routes the Indians traveled in part resemble some of the roadways that exist today.

When the early cattle ranchers who settled the Mexican land grants arrived, they too followed these early routes with their horses and carriages, thus increasing the width of the roadways. When the farmers came in the 1850s, these roadways were used by wagons and stagecoaches. As needed, other roadways were carved out.

The area known as Rockville Corners was always a natural point as a route for the Indians and then as a pioneer trail. Today you can travel up Green Valley Road and be fairly certain you are tracing an early route over to Napa, which was later designated part of the original Fremont Trail.

Rockville became a stop for the stagecoaches traveling from Benicia to Sacramento and was a stop for the Pony Express. Beginning in 1849, hordes of gold-hungry miners passed by Rockville on their way to the mine regions.

The stagecoaches also stopped at Cordelia, one reason why Capt. Waterman decided to select the site as a town that would become a shipping and commerce center.

As more and more pockets were inhabited, becoming small settlements, more public roads were needed.

In the early 1900s, the automobile became a fact of life, and the building, reconfiguring and improving of roadways has been ongoing ever since.

In the beginning, some of these roads were hard-packed and easy to traverse. Others became wintertime mud holes. As an example, in the early 1900s, to travel to Sacramento during the summer you could cross the causeway area between Davis and Sacramento on land, but during the winter, wagons and then the first cars used the railroad bridges, which were open to the public during certain hours.

Essentially, the building of roads to accommodate the automobile went through three phases. Initially they were undeveloped and many were impassable during winter.

These routes were laid with gravel, which, though a rough ride, made them passable during winter. Eventually these roads were paved.

The main highway between Sacramento and San Francisco was routed through Solano County traversing many of the towns. Suisun City was bypassed and business and prosperity for this once thriving mecca declined.

On the other hand, in 1912, the road was cut through Vacaville, which was to enjoy the business of traveling motorists. When Rockville Road became part of Highway 40, the barn that belonged to Lewis Pierce became a gas station.

Meanwhile, the Lincoln Highway, a coast-to-coast route from New York to San Francisco, went from Sacramento to Stockton and then by way of Castro Valley and Oakland to San Francisco.

In 1927, the Carquinez Bridge opened and the Lincoln Highway was rerouted through Solano County to San Francisco. The highway, the predecessor of Interstate 80, zigzagged across the county, meandering in and out of Solano's towns. Lewis Pierce's old barn changed hands and became Bandana Lou, a cafe specializing in fried chicken, potatoes and biscuits and a favorite stop for motorists.

The Lincoln Highway was touted as one of the most scenic drives and as being in mint condition with a concrete base and asphalt surface. One of the scenic points mentioned in write-ups was the fruited valleys of Solano County, including the Vaca Valley.

In 1927, the United States began a numbering system for highways rather than names. The Lincoln Highway Association took what was left in its treasury and had concrete road markers made up with a bronze bust of Abraham Lincoln embedded in them.

A newspaper account from Sept. 13, 1928, states that the Lincoln Highway signs were being posted by the Boy Scouts. The Fairfield scouts were posting signs from "My Place" to Chadbourne Road. The Suisun scouts were posting them from Chadbourne Road to Benicia Road in Cordelia. Today these markers are hard to find, but the one that was originally placed at the Nut Tree is now at Andrews Park in Vacaville.

Commuter traffic first came into Solano County due to the activity at the Fairfield Air Base (now Travis) and the Mare Island shipyard during the war years.

Because of a lack of housing in Solano County and the wartime moratorium on building, many of the people assigned to the air base traveled daily from San Francisco and other points in the Bay Area.

In 1938, Vallejo restaurateur Terry Curtola Sr. built a giant cement barrel and placed at the entrance of his place, the Barrel Club, which was right alongside the roadway. It became a landmark and made it into Ripley's Believe It Or Not as the biggest barrel in the world.

Later, Curtola placed a giant clock atop the barrel. Many a commuter came to rely on this clock, which was by then a famous landmark along the highway.

Highway 40 was being reconfigured all this time. In the '20s, '30s and '40s, it seemed the route moved every week as construction continued.

Also, buildings and homes were having to be moved. Several houses in Vacaville were removed to Vallejo at one point. By the end of the 1940s, the highway was taking a course somewhat close to what I-80 is today.

It was in these last stages that the town of Denverton was bypassed by a secondary road, Highway 12. A store/gas station was all that survived and that eventually failed.

After the settlers arrived and planted orchards, the traveler would pass a profusion of cherry trees in the Suisun Valley and Green Valley Township.

Today you can still meander on stretches of road that are reminiscent of the early days of a country drive on the Lincoln Highway. Take the Cherry Glen cutoff from I-80 west and experience it for yourself.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/578>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/578/>