

Early pioneer's wandering spirit brought him here

By Jerry Bowen

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Before there was a Vacaville, there had to be people. In some of my articles I will introduce you to a few of the people that were a part of its beginnings, how they got here and events that were a part of Solano County and Vacaville's history.

David Dewey Dutton was among the first pioneers in the Vacaville area. His desire to wander took him on a long and interesting journey from his place of origin to California.

He described his home farm in Berkshire County, Mass., as being "so rough it was almost necessary to sharpen the sheep's noses so they could get down between the rocks to where the grass grew, and as to sowing grain, they shot it into the ground with a musket."

David remarked later in his life that "... our family was of a roving disposition and thought it no sin to get out of the reach of our mother's apron strings." He must have meant it because he left home for the unexplored West in about 1819 at the age of 16.

The "West" at that time was still east of the Mississippi River for most pioneers. He worked at various occupations in Michigan, Indiana and Mississippi for about 20 years before succumbing to the urge to move on to new adventures.

In 1839 he joined Peter Lassen, 10 other men and two women who were headed for Oregon. At that time the Oregon Trail crossed mostly unexplored land.

The first 300 miles was easy traveling and pure water was plentiful, but as they entered what the early pioneers called "the great desert" (from Kansas to the Rocky Mountains), the land became more desolate. Dutton described herds of buffalo as being so numerous that while crossing the Platte River, their numbers were so great they actually dammed the water, causing the river to overflow its banks.

Upon reaching Fort Hall, Idaho, the two women remained there as the rest of the group joined with 27 trappers from the American Fur Co. on the final leg to Oregon.

During a brief stop at Green River, Wyo., he met Kit Carson. Carson was a living legend and the surprised Dutton later commented, "Why, he is nothing but a man after all."

When they reached The Dalles on the Columbia River in Oregon, they continued downriver to Fort Vancouver by boat or raft.

His stay was short, as living was poor and it rained all the time. In those days the population of Oregon consisted of four or five missionaries, about the same number of trappers who were living with native women, and a few runaway sailors.

In the summer of 1840, Lassen, William Wiggins, Pablo Gutierrez, Sebastian Keyser, Nicklaus Allegier, David Dutton and one other man boarded the ship *Lausanne*, bound for California. It was a rough and dangerous voyage and when the ship arrived at Bodega Bay, they weren't allowed to disembark under orders of Gen. Vallejo. The Russians, who were at odds with the Spanish, sent troops to escort some of the men to Fort Sutter; however, Dutton decided to sail on to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii).

After a year in Hawaii, Dutton was on the high seas once again, wandering for another three years to such exotic ports as Tahiti and the coast of South America. Finally Dutton returned to Bodega, where he constructed a mill for a Capt. Smith in 1844. He worked for Sutter for a short time as a carpenter receiving his pay in cattle, then moved to Butte County to cattle ranch.

In 1846 he established a ranch at Vaca Valley in Gates Canyon. Unencumbered by fences, his cattle ranged from Putah Creek to the Montezuma Hills.

When gold was discovered in 1848 at Coloma, he joined a man named Dickey, who was an experienced gold miner, and tried his luck on the Feather River. It was a good decision. After a few months he banked \$80,000 and returned to ranching in Vaca Valley. In 1851 he went east via Mexico and bought 1,000 head of cattle in Missouri. He delivered and sold the cattle in Salt Lake City, where he remained through the winter.

Life was still anything but dull as a cattle rancher, as evidenced by a speech he gave at the Suisun Pioneer Society in 1884:

"As I was returning from Downeyville, after delivering 100 head of cattle, I met a narrow escape. I had \$6,000 tied behind my saddle and was shot at from the dense brush by the roadside. The bullet made a hole in my hat. I clapped spurs to my horse, which was a good one, and in true Comanche style, my body on the other side, holding onto the cinch with one spur, leaving only the leg in sight, I heard another shot, but I made a lucky escape and had it not been for arriving at Marysville, I might have been running yet. The escape cured me of carrying money in the saddlebags."

Apparently Dutton was ready to settle down about this time. Vacaville was becoming a reality and this is where I'll leave this story. As we examine the history of Solano

County and Vacaville, I'll refer back to him as well as others we will meet in future stories. There is much to learn about those fabulous people who came here before us and the exciting times of discovery and the building of the West.

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