

Reporters took probing tour into country

By Kristin Delaplane

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In the spring of 1879, staff from the Suisun City's Solano Republican set out to explore the countryside. Their trip started with a train ride to Bridgeport, present-day Cordelia. Along the route they viewed the orchards then in bloom. Once in Bridgeport they stopped in at each of the town's business establishments.

Postmaster Humphreys operated the post office out of his general merchandise store. Next to him was James Turner's boot and shoe making establishment. He was the only shoemaker in town. Then came H. Bibler's meat market. In the same building, Al Wood managed a saloon. Next in line was Buhrmeister & Siebe's general merchandise store. The last business on that side of the street was another saloon.

On the opposite side of the street was the train depot. W.J. Jewell, formally of Rio Vista, was the station agent as well as Wells Fargo & Co.'s agent and the local telegraph operator. Two businesses had just opened: Phillip J. Doll's combination barber shop and confectionery store and J.H. Valentine's carriage and wagon painting establishment. The saws and planer at W.W. Mason's box factory were buzzing away. In L. Eber's blacksmith shop Ed Gerow was perfecting an original design farming device. An attachment for a horse plow, it would enable the plow to come in close to the orchard trees. Next in line was James Crowley's saloon and a boarding house.

Mrs. J. Pittman was busy running the Bridgeport Hotel. Her deceased husband, Charles Pittman, an Englishman, had arrived in Cordelia in 1855 becoming the proprietor of the hotel. In his day, Pittman had been postmaster and his hotel was the polling place for the Green Valley Township. In 1862, he built the Bridgeport Hotel, a lavish building. When he died in 1864, his wife took over the duties of a proprietor and was praised for her fine dining. In 1877, Mrs. Pittman gave a Christmas party, the Bridgeport Tree & Dance. A bountiful meal was served and there were presents for the youngsters. After presents, the children were sent to the nearby schoolhouse while the adults stayed for an old fashioned holiday dance. Marion Stilts provided the music. In 1878, the Pittman Hotel was in the news when Philbrick, the barkeeper, got in a fight with the Chinese cook. Philbrick was cut on the head, an artery severed and the cook was put in jail.

From the Pittman Hotel, the reporters set out on foot to the Green Valley. As they left town, they passed by the schoolhouse which was being run by Mr. Jamison and Miss Lulu Owens. Further up the road, they came upon farms and dwellings.

The first farm house was owned by John Mayhood who had a small tract of land under cultivation. Next to him was Mr. Lynch's, a neatly painted house. On land rented from G. Ramsey Mr. Herbison was engaged in growing grain and corn. G.M. Berry was his neighbor across the road. His house was on Capt. C.E. Shillaber's land. The captain's house was further east on a farm consisting of 180 acres. On this 180 acres Shillaber had 10,000 grape vines and was preparing to plant 10,000 eucalyptus trees. He was most proud of the extensive barberry hedge which encircled his house and barn.

The next place the travelers came upon was the estate of G. Ramsey consisting of 1,600 acres. Having arrived in 1848, the Ramsey family were some of the first settlers in the area. Determining that the soil and other conditions were particularly well suited for grape growing, they developed a vineyard. G. Ramsey lived in a large, elegant stone mansion that had been built in 1860. A great profusion of trees, flowers, shrubs and vines were growing around the house.

Crossing over the valley to the west, the next residence was Isaac Crow's. His land, 160 acres, was planted in grain. He also had a stock of hogs.

George Mason's 166-acre ranch was cultivated and he had a large vineyard. George Washington Mason was one of Green Valley's pioneers arriving in 1850. He wore a silk hat and got around in a buggy. Rumor was that most days he was drunk. George had crossed the plains in a covered wagon with his wife, Sarah. On their land they had orchards with pears, plums, apricots, prunes. They also raised cattle.

James Capell's farm was 254 acres. He also had a vineyard. His was the second to the last stop on the traveler's itinerary. As dusk approached, they reached F.S. Jones' and he offered to put them up for the night. Jones, a successful vineyard farmer, had married Granville Swift's daughter. The house they lived in was known as the Granville Swift stone house. It was nestled in the midst of overhanging oak trees growing on the side of a mountain that backed the dwelling. This was the first house built in the area having been constructed in the 1850s. In about 1862 a mass of 50 cherry trees were planted along the carriage drive to the house.

Jones had 307 acres planted in grapes. His vineyard was producing 250 tons of grapes, which would yield 35,000 gallons of wine. His wine cellar was perhaps the largest in the valley. It had a capacity for 30,000 gallons. A still was located in the cellar for producing brandy attested to by the travelers to be of the very best quality.

The next morning the newspaper men set out for the Green Valley Falls. The morning was breezy and damp and the grass and bushes along the way were dripping with moisture. The road narrowed to a wide path and then narrowed again to the width of a sheep trail. In time a little shanty was seen in the distance on the bank of the stream.

When the travelers got in calling distance, they found the dwelling vacant. Beyond it the shanty, the road turned wide again, but only briefly. In a short time, it again became a narrow trail. Just as they were giving up hope of finding the falls, they saw Marion Stilts, the same man who provided the music for Mrs. Pittman's Christmas dance. He was at the stream trolling for trout. He was able to give the men directions and they were soon on the right path to the falls. In a matter of minutes, from a distance, they could see the water shimmering down the facade of a solid mountain wall. These travelers had seen many falls in their time, including the Niagara Falls, but seldom, they reported, had they seen so small a fall, so beautifully located and surrounded by such picturesque scenery.

After taking in the beauty of the falls, they continued on their trek of the valley. Coming up from the falls they reached the Beauferton Ranch. It was owned by an Italian family, who had devoted their land to viniculture.

Next they were at "Bella Vista," a vineyard owned by Votypka & Son. John Votypka, an Austrian, had settled on this 380-acre farm in 1858. Thirty-five acres were planted in vines which yielded 140 tons of grapes. The Votypka family wine cellar could store 20,000 gallons. They shipped most of their wines to Milwaukee, but they also shipped a large amount to Hamburg, Germany.

On this trip back, the travelers passed over the eastern side of the valley where George Cook had his farm. He had 850 acres planted in grain and cut large quantities of wood yearly. Further down the road was H. Brown's place. His 44 acres were planted in orchards and vines and he boasted his wine cellar could hold 25,000 gallons.

Next came Mrs. Meister's ranch which was defined by a line of almond trees along the road. Mr. Millard Meister had worked at Dingley's old mill when it was in operation. He had done various tasks including preparing a dam in 1853.

Dingley's old mill was near the Meister's. By 1879 it had long been abandoned and only the stone walls remained, the woodwork and interior having been destroyed in a fire years before.

After Dingley's Mill, the newly purchased acreage belonging to Curtis Wilson was in view. Wilson had just retired as Justice of the Peace for the Green Valley Township, a position he had held since 1855. Wilson, who hailed from Missouri, came to the Suisun Valley in 1850 as a house painter. The island that was to become Suisun City was first discovered in 1850 by Curtis Wilson and Dr. John Baker when they sailed up the winding Suisun Slough. At that time the environment was tules and mudhens. At the site, they spied a herd of elk and killed one for their meal. In 1867, Wilson was appointed the station agent of the California Pacific Railroad and Wells Fargo agent.

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