

# Fruit operations make a mark in Vacaville

By Kristin Delaplane

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The orchards in the Vacaville Township were abuzz with activity and making the farmers plenty of money most seasons.

Would-be fruit ranchers were anxious to try their hand at this successful business. For \$15,000, one of the best fruit ranches could be had. Located close to town, it boasted grape vines and a large variety of fruit trees.

In another instance, for \$7,000, one could purchase a 30-acre fruit ranch with 1,200 trees of apples, pears, plums, peaches, cherries and apricots, as well as 3,000 grape vines. This purchase price included a five-room house, two wells, a barn and other farm buildings, three plows, three cultivators and a fruit dryer.

Fresh fruit was the main market, but drying and canning were becoming viable options. George M. Blake had a large steam drying operation on his ranch. George Broughton was the agent for Wheeler's Patent Cannery, fitted for the small stove as well as large canneries. On one trip out to Pleasants Valley he sold 22 of these gems.

With water a continuing consideration, it was widely hailed when a good spring was developed on the south side of Rocky. Instantly troughs were put in for the grazing sheep. Some of these sheep had been brought in by San Francisco butchers in preparation for market.

The hatching business of Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Farnsworth was on schedule. They had 400 ducks hatched with more hatching daily. The women, high with success, were building an incubator house.

Wandering animals were a constant problem. There were a number of complaints about free ranging hogs and cattle rummaging about the orchards. Haswell of Pleasants Valley lost his horse. It turned out it had strayed to a ranch near Dixon. W.M. Mix found a filly on his land. With proof of ownership (usually being able to name identifying markings), the owner could have the animal after paying a pasturage fee. Meanwhile, out in Elmira a mare strayed and was being sought.

Vacaville's Jepson was selling his draft horses, a fine team. Another party was selling an express wagon, harness and two horses for \$150.

In sporting news, James Gates built a race track on his ranch to train his trotting colt.

In Pleasants Valley, young nimrod J.N. Thissell was mourning the passing of his favorite hound. Shortly thereafter two more of his hounds were poisoned. The more fortunate of man's best friend were garnering awards. A pointer pup belonging to George Peabody of Suisun was awarded a first place at the P.C. Kennel Club Bench Show in San Francisco. Vacaville's Henry A. Bassford got a second place with his pointer pup as did J.M. Bassford, Sr. for his foxhound.

A \$25 bounty was paid to John Johnson for capturing a coyote measuring 5 feet 8 inches, tip to tip. Scalp certificates were issued to local hunters. J.W. Thissell was the leader with 13 wildcats and 26 foxes. J.K. Spauling was the lone hunter of a gray eagle. Lyon Foree was happy with his certificate for one wildcat.

Meanwhile, another hunter was on the loose. Though many thousands of gophers drowned in the late rains, there were still a number left. Russel Pleasants was making a few cents hunting the varmints for which his father paid 10 cents a head. Ladies also participated in the hunt as was illustrated when a young lady was spied hunting, and the ease and grace with which she handled a gun was appropriately noted.

There were good fishing reports from Putah Creek. Pike and black fish were numerous. The catfish were still small having been planted there only two years prior. The fish in Ulatis Creek weren't doing so well. With the hot weather and increasing warmth of the water, the fish in that waterway were dying.

That summer a group, including H.P. Stice and family, spent a month camping in the nearby hills. Their headquarters, where there was a sulfur spring, was in Mix Canyon near Senator Buck's place.

Vacaville's senior citizens were an active lot. G.W. Thissell, an old resident of Pleasants Valley, was laid up when he was kicked by a horse. He wasn't down long. He was invigorated in those days with the success with his coddling moth traps. Though not yet manufactured, he had orders for 7,000 traps.

Another longtime resident of Vacaville, J.V. Stark, wrote a lengthy dissertation on logic, a subject he had studied for many years.

D.G. Scoggins, 85, fell off a ladder in his barn. When he recovered consciousness, he found a nest in one of the stalls and laid down until he felt able to walk to the house. He was put to bed, against his will, for two weeks.

Vacaville's social news included the item that pioneer Luzena Wilson was sailing to Europe with her daughter for a 6-month grand tour.

A notable social event was the wedding of O.H. Allison and Ella Brock, daughter of L.H. Brock, a prominent Vacaville farmer. A large number of guests were invited, including the Chandlers and Dobbins, as the couple were said to move in the best circles of Vacaville's society. The bride wore a dress of navy blue silk trimmed with lace and velvet. Their presents were numerous and pricey. The couple honeymooned in San Francisco.

A dance given at widow Pierson's in Pleasants Valley was also grand event. The guests arrived at eight o'clock. At nine the opening quadrille, played by a fiddler and a guitarist, was led by the hostess. Later, a supper was served with pies and cakes as the centerpiece. The festivities lasted until four in the morning.

In town, folks were entertained by a performance by the traveling Wyman Comedy Co.

Commencement exercises from the California Normal & Scientific School proved to be fashion news. Graduate, Miss Blum wore a embroidered cream colored ottoman silk. Miss Merchant wore white cashmere dress with satin baroque. Long loops of satin ribbon decorated the skirt. Miss Stevenson's dress was also cream colored polka dot satin. Miss Ward was attired in white nun's veiling waist trimmed with lace. And Miss Bartlett wore a white brocaded satin with trimmings of lace and long loops of satin ribbon.

Later there was a party - music, games, food and croquet by lantern light - at J.B. Merchant's for the graduating class.

W.J. Stevens, principal of the California Normal & Scientific School, was soon gearing up for the next class of graduates and was actively advertising for the new term. Board and lodging was \$84; tuition, \$38.40; books and stationery, \$6. The total cost was \$128.40. A lady would be opening a boarding house and the charge for table board was \$3 a week. Penmanship was one of the courses offered, which Professor J. Buck taught at 4 p.m. and 7 p.m.

One enterprising mother, Mrs. L. Buchanan of Mariposa County, was determined that her three girls should attend the college. She moved to Vacaville and moved into Dr. Gregory's house taking on the position of landlady to operate the residence as a boarding house.

A steeple was built onto the Baptist church and that summer, for the first time, a bell was rung to call the worshipers to church.

Vacaville's young and sinful Ida Bemas had been locked up (presumably in her home) so that she might be redeemed. However, she would have none of it and escaped her

“prison.” She ran away to Sacramento. She was almost immediately noticed there when she had a man arrested she claimed made indecent proposals to her. After that it was reported that she led a “degraded life and became dissipated,” actions that led to her arrest. Her parents, on receiving word of their Ida, left Vacaville to settle in Reno where the judge was sending Ida.

In the barroom at Hodgins House there was a row over a game of cards. A few weeks later things once again erupted at the Hodgins House. A man named Lawson from San Francisco arrived and fired upon Mr. Hodgins in the barroom. Not the best shot, he missed his target with four tries. Apparently, Lawson’s rage was based on the fact that his wife, who had been employed at the boarding house, had been fired. Her dismissal was for alleged intimacy with the boarders. Having run out of ammunition, Lawson took off for Bennett’s Saloon. He was promptly arrested. As he was being escorted from the saloon, an enraged Mrs. Hodgins (no stranger to law herself) sprang on the prisoner with a knife. The prisoner escaped injury as she was quickly disarmed. That night Lawson was taken to the Fairfield jail as there was none in “peaceful” Vacaville.

Things to come: The Vacaville Reporter’s publisher, James D. McClain, purchased the land referred to as the Triangle. He declared it the most valuable location in Vacaville and he had big plans. This was to be the site of a five-story building, complete with marble edifice and basement, for the Vacaville Reporter.

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The selling and buying of a slave driver’s home

Editor’s note: The following excerpts are from an oral history with Vacaville fruit rancher Ed Uhl, born 1895, provided by the Vacaville Museum.

‘Our home was at the corner of Gibson Canyon Road and Monte Vista. It was built in the 1860s. It was a damn shame to tear it down. We lost a real charming old home. It had three fireplaces of marble.

“We bought the property in 1903. It was built by Dobbins, a slave driver from Kentucky. He was pretty tough. He carried a gun and, as each son become of age, they were presented a pearl-handled revolver. On one occasion, the old gentleman Dobbins took a shot at a guy with two attempts. Missed him both times. The judge fined him \$12. So you can see what the conditions were like in those early days. Later it was different and, when one of his sons killed a man in a poker game at one of the saloons on Main Street, he got a life sentence. His father spent all the money he had trying to save him and that’s how we come to buy (it).

“My dad had in mind he could buy that house, so he went to see R. D. Robbins, Sr. in Suisun, who was the man who loaned the money to Dobbins in the first place.

"Robbins had two banks in Suisun. He was a very wealthy man. He came into Suisun with blankets on his back in about 1880 and went to work for the lumber yard. But he never drew a dollar. Then, when they had a panic - we call it a depression - in the 1890s he got the lumber yard, because they owed him quite a lot of money by then. He became the most prosperous guy in this county, without exception. He died in 1916 with around \$20 million.

"I was 8 at the time, 1903, and my father took me with him to Suisun. Suisun was a thriving city. Fairfield was nothing in those days. There'd be a house over there over there and maybe 1000 feet away would be another. We went in winter time by train from Elmira. When we reached Suisun, they didn't even have a sign out there "Suisun-Fairfield" and that's a fact. It was about a half-a-mile walk to the Bank of Suisun.

"These two men, Robbins and my dad, were well acquainted. The snag was this: My dad could have the money, no problem, but when my dad said, '6 percent?' Robbins says, 'Oh, no, gotta be 7 percent.' This talk of 6 and 7 percent went on for hours with no one giving. We stopped for a nice lunch at the Arlington Hotel, which was the best hotel in the entire area and was owned by Robbins - he had had to foreclose on it. Then we went back and the talk went on. One has to stay with 6 (percent), the other has to have 7 (percent). It continued as we walked, the three of us, to the depot to catch the train back to Elmira. The train arrives and my dad and I get aboard. Just as the train started to move Robbins came running and said, 'I'll take 6!' Robbins said to my dad later, 'I'm awfully glad you own this. I couldn't foreclose on Dobbins. I had a right to. He never paid me any interest, let alone any principal money. But I knew I'd be killed if I pressed him. So you can see why I was tickled.'

"Well, of course, this was true. The Dobbins people had been slave drivers. I have known several slave drivers in my life and they were all real tough.

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