

County cultural, economic scenes brighten

By Kristin Delaplane

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In the summer of 1883, an account in the Dixon newspaper on the Davis House open house given by the hotel's new owners, Little and Barker, went as follows: "A large number of Dixonites attended. . . . Trees were brilliantly illuminated by Chinese lanterns. The Dixon Orchestra furnished the music. . . . The supper was under the supervision of Mrs. Barker. Harry and his estimable wife entertained the guests with genuine Missouri hospitality. . . . Vacaville is now not only one of the prettiest and coziest little villages . . . but one of the busiest and most enterprising."

Improvements were being accomplished by the new owners. They purchased a carriage to transfer passengers to and from the train depot and they spruced up the atmosphere with the purchase of a piano for the hotel parlor.

Meanwhile, former proprietor I.F. Davis was busy overseeing the building of his grand new residence in the grove near Ulatis Creek. The workmen, digging out the foundation for the vault, unearthed the remains of some native Indians who had once had a village on that spot.

Gen. Davis, brother of I.F., owned this land known as "the Grove." At this time, he divided the area up into 10 lots naming it the Nevada Block. This consisted of 10 lots on the front and in the rear separated by an alleyway.

With times booming, B. F. Newport and O.E.H. Garlich formed a partnership to operate a real estate business. Newport's Bazaar Store expanded to sell ice cream and cold lemonade, popular items on any hot summer day.

Charles Loomis had a threshing machine for hire and he was never shy of getting jobs. He averaged 300 sacks of grain a day, a hard record to beat.

A scissors grinder came to town setting up shop on Main Street.

Fred Hutton (probably a young man who later became editor of the Dixon newspaper) was in the hauling business in competition to Nathan Holt, the town's constable.

H. Scott was entering the fruit drying business and was building a fruit drying shed on the lot west of Sam Sing's wash house. The shed was to be 20 by 24 feet.

The local builders were in stiff competition. Meredith Miller's residence, being built by local contractor J. Donoho, was to have seven large rooms. Donoho had expanded his expertise from the blacksmithing business he operated with his brother.

The contract for the Reporter's building on the Triangle lot was awarded to Vacaville's J.M. Daggett.

Builder F. B. Tucker was opening a carpentry shop in the rear of Kinsmill's harness shop. Thomas Kinsmill was just in the process of also taking on O.P. Williams as a partner. Meanwhile, Tucker won the bid to erect Vacaville's first jail, which was to 12 by 16 feet and 10 feet high. This jail when built was located at the edge of Ulatis Creek next to the "majestic" college.

The students at the college organized a literary society for the purpose of reading, recitation, vocal and instrumental music and extempore speaking.

Henry Sturgill was mourning the death of his horse, which died at the age of 30. In 1856, this honorable equine had made that long, hard trip across the Plains.

Zach Gates's prized horse was going to be entered in the race, a 300 yard dash, at the August Harvest picnic at Oiler's Grove. In addition to horse racing, there were speeches by politicians and dancing.

Putting up a windmill was no easy matter. A few men were erecting a windmill at Dr. Blake's ranch. They decided to elevate the structure so that it would rise to 40 feet. In the midst of elevating it, the whole structure came crashing down to earth.

In this year, 1883, Isabella Pena, wife of the pioneer Juan Felipe Pena, was 85 and very ill. She was living with her daughter, Nestora Rivera, at the adobe homestead. In 1884, Isabella would die and be buried next to her husband in Benicia

Demetria (also spelled Demetrio) Pena sold his ranch in Lagoon Valley to Mrs. P. Buckingham for \$22,500. The land consisted of 200 acres principally planted in grain. Mrs. Buckingham was to change the landscape to be a large fruit growing area.

Back in town, there was a hue and cry about the local boys' swimming habits. The swimming hole was near Dr. Dobbins (Gibson Canyon and Monte Vista) and many of the boys were foregoing any swimming attire. They were threatened with arrest if they did not desist from skinny-dipping.

Platt, Stice & Co., a major general merchandising store whose motto was "Absolutely fair dealing and one price to all," added a large inventory of furniture to meet the

increased population needs. They also purchased three lots west of the Triangle lot in anticipation of building a major store to accommodate their vast inventory. At this point the departments within the store were expansive: A home furnishing section featured parlor sets, chamber sets, wardrobes, kitchen cabinets and safes, bureaus, tables, chairs, carpeting, wall paper, curtains, mattresses and pillows. There was a dress goods section and full hardware section. The grocery store with teas, coffees, spices, canned goods, crockery, glassware. In addition, the store also managed a large insurance business.

The talk in town was about the attempted swindle. A man calling himself Riffinburg appeared at S.L. Decker's doorstep in Vaca Valley stating his wish to buy the place. After some negotiation, a price was agreed upon. Riffinburg inventoried everything. After the weekend, he and the Mrs. Decker went to Fairfield to check the title. He suggested then that he and Mrs. Decker go to Sacramento for the business transaction. Mrs. Decker declined, favoring her local bank in Vacaville. When they arrived at her bank, Riffinburg said he would tie up the horses. At this point he disappeared. It was assumed he boarded the train, the timing being perfect for such an escape.

Riffinburg who wore a long, linen duster, was described as "a small, dark complexed man with heavy black whiskers and a stiff right knee." Mrs. Decker suspected that the "swindle" would have taken place in Sacramento had she been willing to go there instead. As she had not, the "swindle" was off and the scoundrel went to greener pastures.

Another suspected character appeared on the scene a while later. This "dude" was all decked out in a white hat, short coat, tight pants, needle-pointed shoes and carrying a penny stick. At first he was bartering for Mrs. Weldon's ranch. Next he appeared at J.O. Coburn's ranch and carried on a bargaining session with that gentleman. He disappeared, but it was assumed he must be a "crank" up to no good.

With all these strangers arriving, it was determined the town needed better communication system and Vacaville entered an age of modern technology when druggist and postmaster J.M. Miller installed a Morse telegraph key and sounder. Next the head cashier at the bank put in the same system and Nathan Holt, the constable, followed suit, having one installed in his house to connect him with the stations in town.

George Weldon gave people a giggle when he came into town to find his cow which had strayed and upon finding the animal, rode the cow home. Cattle seemed to be running amuck. When a drove of cattle were being herded through town attacked a load of hay which was piled on the street. The owner of the hay was most upset to see a big bite taken out of his profit.

I. Osole, who had long been in the business of buying and selling cattle in San Francisco, bought the lot east of the Donoho brothers' blacksmithing business and was anticipating opening a butcher shop.

The Boys and Girls' Aid Society of San Francisco announced in the local paper that they had children for adoption or for indenture or wage service.

There was a surprise party given at the residence of E.P. Williams. Of special note was the fact that Vacaville Township boasted a few musicians the music was supplied by a banjo player, guitarist and two violinists.

Also in the social news was the fact that young men in town formed the Vacaville Social Club.

That grand fruit pioneer, G.W. Thissell, was all set to attend the fair in Sacramento. His exhibit was 30 varieties of peaches canned at his ranch and 17 miscellaneous varieties of fruit. After his showing at the fair, he planned to take his fruit to San Francisco for an exhibit.

A 49ers celebration was held in Suisun City. To be a member of the 49er society you had to have been a resident of California prior to Jan. 1, 1851 or be a male descendant of such a party. With the Elmira Brass Band providing the music, the pioneers formed a line at 10:30 a.m. and marched to the train depot to greet their orator the Honorable L.B. Mizner. (Mizner is mentioned in the history books in 1851, when McDaniel, purchased land from Manuel Vaca including the land that was to become the site of Vacaville. Immediately McDaniel deeded half interest in the tract of land to L.B. Mizner.)

The parade was led by Demetria Pena, son of Juan Felipe Pena, who carried the banner for the Society. It was silk, gold braided and tasseled and cost \$100. The date the society was formed was printed on one side, "December 24, 1881." On the reverse side was a picture of Chief Solano. On not meeting with Mizner, the pioneers marched back the Henry's Theater where they heard a speaker.

The festivities continued at the Odd Fellows Hall where food was served including fruits, wine, tea and coffee. In all, 500 people attended. Those who wished, went back to Henry's Theater for dancing.

George Brougham, who had been the successful agent for Wheeler's Patent Cannery, was moving to Australia. A vast auction sale was being held to unload his furnishings.

Finally, the editor made the following free-wheeling report after visiting Collinsville,

which was busy as a shipping point and as the site of a major fish canning business.

“Here a fish is disemboweled, drawn and quartered in two seconds, while the fish is yet quivering. Long tables run through the building, along which may be seen men with huge cutlasses in their hands uplifted and blades gleaming in the sunlight was calculated to strike terror into the whole piscatorial kingdom. Fish in baths, fish in tubs, fish roasted, fish boiled, fish steamed, fish on the half shell and fish everywhere. Even the very atmosphere was redolent with the smell of fish.

“Pescado appeared to be a representative man. He wore alligator boots and had rudimentary barnacles forming on his nether extremities. . . . The people are decidedly alien in appearance and build their houses in the primitive state of ancient Lake dwellers on piles on the tule. Children are kept in coops at the rear of their dwellings to keep them from falling overboard. . . . Cows are backed on raised slabs to be milked and goats are hoisted up by the horns for same purpose.”

Cernon, Merchant named for smithies

Cernon and Merchant streets were named after blacksmiths.

Hugh Cernon was the first blacksmith in Vacaville. When John Merchant first located in Vacaville, he followed his trade as a blacksmith and at one time he was a partner of Hugh Cernon's.

After he was here for several years, he took up farming. In 1882, he was elected supervisor of the 4th District. After retiring in 1895, he was appointed roadmaster of the Vacaville Road District, a position he held for several years. He was a member of both the Masons and the Odd Fellows.

John Merchant died in 1899. For over a third of a century he was a resident of Vacaville.

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