

Young, Wood families part of Solano history

By Kristin Delaplane

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It was likely in the 1870s that a sailing vessel passenger Edward A. Young arrived in the Eureka after sailing around the Horn from New Brunswick.

By then, lumbering had replaced gold mining as the major income source in this coastal town and Young went to work in the lumbering business. Not too much time passed when he was met with an accident. One day a giant redwood was felled and in the process Edward's leg was broken. He was sent to San Francisco for medical attention and he remained there during his recovery.

When he was mended, he moved to Solano County. This was in 1875. He located near Bird's Landing and took up farming in the Montezuma Hills.

His first job was to clear the numerous bleached horns that had been shed over the years by the native tule elk. Once the land was cleared, it was ready to be mowed for its wild oats. After the oats were harvested, the ground was broken down and Young planted wheat. Because of the modest rainfall in the area, the farmers did not plant in the summer.

The tule elk were extinct by the time Edward arrived in Solano County, but he was there when mink and beaver were plentiful in the marshes along the Montezuma Slough. He also remembered the great flocks of migrating ducks and geese that appeared in the winter.

Sacramento River boats carried the hunters from San Francisco and many of these sportsmen brought along a man just to help carry the birds. The hunting proved to be so good that on goose hunts in the Rio Vista fields, having a lumber wagon was an important part of the equipment. A morning's bag alone could easily amount to 150 geese.

Harry Hansen, master of the "Goose Heaven" in Maine Prairie, kept wing-clipped geese as live decoys and they were transported in wire cages to the hunting grounds. Entire wild flocks of geese would light to join these decoys. Edward often spoke of the time the decoys were brought back home and when counted, numbered two too many. Soon two geese took wing and flew away.

Edward Young married Lulu Wood. Lulu's family had arrived in California in 1863 by

covered wagon from Illinois. She often related her tale about the time Indians on ponies reconnoitered their wagon train. They did not attack.

The Wood family first settled in Bodega. After nine years they moved to Napa where Lulu's father Alexander engaged in the harness business. Three years later, in 1875, he moved the family to Suisun.

In Suisun, he opened a saddle and harness shop. Wood's harness shop became well known for the stuffed dapple gray horse he had on display. From 1896 to 1899, he held the position of postmaster in Suisun.

Wood Young was born in 1891. He attended Willow Spring School at the crossroads of Bird's Landing. Every day he walked a mile to the schoolhouse. On rainy days he was transported by horse and buggy.

Of course, the milelong walk was a shortcut. This shortcut was through a field that were pasture for the family's sheep. Some of the sheep would come up to Wood he had bottle fed when they were lambs. He often stopped and shared the contents in his lunch pail with his four-footed "pals."

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Wood Young later was a founding member of the Solano County Historical Society member, writer of local history for the Daily Republic (1965-1968), and author of "The Vaca-Pena Los Putos Rancho and the Pena Adobe."

Coal and kerosene were the sources for heat and light in the home. The coal, transported by schooners, came from the Mount Diablo mines. The kerosene was purchased in 5-gallon cans from the Bird's Landing country store owned by Bird and Dinkelspiel. (This store has recently been refurbished and is a historical centerpiece at Bird's Landing)

Fresh milk came from the family cow. Milking was a chore given to the children early on. Wood recalled that the "wicked swish of the cow's tail during fly season was dangerous to the milker's eyes." The barn cats always sat close by waiting for the occasional squirt of milk.

After attending school at University of California, Berkeley, Wood returned to the family farm. He came up from San Francisco on one of the stern-wheel paddle boats.

Deck hands took advantage of the ride to wash their overalls. The clothing was tied to a rope and washed by being dragged in the wake of created by the paddle wheel.

The plowing for the summer fallow on the steep Montezuma Hills was done with eight-horse teams, driven by jerk-line. "Gee" and "haw" were the command words understood by the near leader. A light iron jockey stick, attached to the bridle of the off leader from collar of the near leader helped propel the off to the right at the command "gee." The single line was only jerked when this communication failed.

Each driver fed and harnessed his eight horses or mules an hour before breakfast. At 6:30 a.m. the team was led two abreast to the fields. Plowing 3 acres was considered a good day's work with a two-gang plow, so 36 horses were needed on an average wheat ranch. When the combined grain harvesters became common farm equipment, a team of 28 horses took care of the job.

The Montezuma cultivators were used to cover the broadcasted seed wheat. When Caterpillar tractors came into use, the Montezuma cultivators were manufactured so that they would be heavier and these were used to plow for summer fallow. Fifty acres was a day's work.

The Montezuma Hill cultivators were made by Bert Bleckwelder, the blacksmith at Bird's Landing. During the 1920s, the Russian government purchased a Montezuma cultivator for the wheat fields in the Ukraine. In time, the Bleckwelder Manufacturing Co. became well known for it's sugar beet and tomato harvesters.

During the Depression, sacked wheat sold for \$20 a ton - if you could find a buyer. It was during these hard times that Wood Young met and married Augusta Chadbourne Tomasini. Augusta had three children, George, Fred and Ruth. Wood Young went into the insurance business, and he also continued to farm until 1951.

In his time, Wood Young heard many stories from early residents of Solano County, which he passed on in his column for the Daily Republic. Most of the early residents had originally come as gold hunters and then turned to what they knew best, farming.

Green Valley was an area to which settlers from the South migrated. Before the Mason family came from the South, Mrs. Mason inquired if Indians made good slaves.

These Southerners were responsible for building the stone Methodist Episcopal Church in Rockville. One Sunday in 1863, the Northerners in the congregation led a song, "Let Freedom Ring." Within days, the Southerners changed the name plate above the church entrance to M.E. Church South.

John Wolfskill was one of the first arrivals to the Putah Creek area in 1842. His descendants recalled that he often swam the Straits of Carquinez on horseback on his trips to and from Los Angeles. During the gold rush era, he loaded up his wagon and sold his fresh apricots in the gold fields for a dollar a pound.

Edwin Markham lived with his widowed mother near the Pena Adobe. When he was a teenager he traveled to the Sacramento Valley to work the summer harvest.

On returning home one autumn, a fellow worker accompanied him. Each was mounted on their own horse. The stranger spent the night at the Markham home, departing before dawn.

On going outside, Edwin spied a fresh mound of dirt in the yard. On uncovering it, he found a bag full of gold coins. It was later suspected that the "stranger" was non other than Black Bart. It was clear that the money had been left to Edwin for his goal to further his education. Markham later became famous for his poem, "The Man with the Hoe."

Johnny Casey of the Potrero Hills made a name for himself in Solano County. In San Francisco, part of the day's street entertainment included domesticated wrestling bears. These bears were masked and their claws trimmed. The trainer would offer \$5 to anyone would could throw the bear.

Casey, paid the \$1 buy-in to try his luck. He was almost successful when the bear removed part of his Levis. The trainer called, "Let the man up, the bear is getting mad."

"Bugger it," said Casey, "I'm getting a little mad myself."

He went on to throw the bear.

According to Young, Ruel Drinkwater Robbins arrived in Suisun with four dollars in his pocket in 1876. As he became successful, he founded the Bank of Suisun. He financed many farmers, but he was also able to acquire some large farms. He died with a fortune of \$5.7 million.

The Suisun Valley orchardists suffered during the Depression, as did all farmers. While people in the cities went hungry, some of the fruit was never harvested, because the cost of labor for picking the fruit was too great.

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