

Writers impressed with local area in 1860s

By Kristin Delaplane

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In the 1800s, writers from newspapers and publications visited Solano County and give a report on the area. The following are excerpts from an article that appeared in the California Rural Home Journal, which was published semimonthly in San Francisco.

The correspondent took a boat to Benicia, arriving there at 2 p.m. From there he traveled by stage to Suisun, arriving at 5 p.m. He spent the night at the City Hotel, where he was greeted with a fire in the large open fireplace. This was particularly welcome that January or February 1865 evening, as it was one of the coldest nights of the season.

"Suisun does not seem to be a town of very extensive business, but, having two newspapers and several merchants and mechanics that appear to be doing a thriving business, it is respectable appearing town for a new town. Taking a private conveyance to our place of destination, we had a most delightful ride. After leaving the lowlands in the vicinity of Suisun the roads were as smooth as a plank road all the way to Putah Creek.

"We passed a little valley at the head of which, on our left, was a lovely little cottage. The land is . . . embossed in a cluster of cultivated trees and shrubbery belonging to a gentleman by the name of Swan.

"We passed the borders of the Vaca Valley, that is highly cultivated, to Pleasants Valley, which truly does not do credit to its name. It is a lovely valley. The lands are under a fine state of cultivation; the grain was up in many instances looking green and healthy, as did the pastures and the orchards and fruit gardens. All were evidence of the fruitfulness of this valley among the hills.

"The cottages and farm houses, as a general thing, though neat, were not as extensive and elegant specimens of rural architecture as we shall probably see in that fertile valley within a few years to come. There are some exceptions as we saw a few cottages that would do credit to much older counties. Mr. Miller, an old resident of the valley, has a large two-story brick house surrounded by fine appearing gardens and vineyards and fruit orchards."

The writer reached his destination:

“Putah Creek, the Wolfskills. Some half dozen miles carried us through Pleasants Valley to the ranch and vineyards and residence of Milton Wolfskill. Embossomed in a little basin surrounded by hills with the clear, pebbly bottomed, crystal waters of Putah Creek rippling through his finely cultivated vineyards and grounds.

“Mr. Wolfskill has been some 10 or 12 years on this place and has all his vineyards and fruit grounds in fine condition. He has on his grounds, besides all the usual fruits of the orchard such as apples, pears, peaches, apricots, plums, cherries, etc., varied specimens of the fig tree, the almond, and olive, which produce excellent fruit of several kinds. And he has oranges, lemons, etc.

“What gives the inhabitants in the region of Putah Creek great advantage over most other parts of California is the fact that they are some six weeks earlier in the market in the spring and summer with their vegetables and fruits than other farmers.

“Mr. Sathiel Wolfskill has also a fine orchard and extensive vineyards on the creek, a couple of miles below. He has the finest grove of fig trees; the largest and most thrifty we have ever seen in this country. We have seen fig trees in the region of the Mediterranean over a century old not larger than Mr. W’s, yet his are only some 12 or 14 years old. They usually get two crops of fruit in a year from these fig trees, and they are of a fine quality. Not quite equal to those of the south of Spain, the Western Barbary and the Mediterranean, but much better than we have ever seen in any other portion of this country.

“There are three or four of the Wolfskill brothers, some living on the Solano side, others on the Yolo side of the creek. They all have fine ranches and vineyards.

“One of them, J.W. (John Wolfskill) has a fine mansion built of the lava or chalk rock peculiar to this region. It has a fine effect, resembling marble at a distance, and is said to be an excellent material for building purposes. Mr. Milton W. has the foundation of his house and wine cellar built of it. The Rio Los Putos ranch, a (Mexican) grant embracing nearly 20,000 acres, is a splendid domain handsomely studded with noble oak trees.

“Noah Robinson has a pretty little farm, very nicely improved, in a pleasant little valley that he says is called ‘Hypocrite Canyon.’ His little cot under the hill is made very sociable and hospitable by his tidy and attentive helpmate and his own cheerful good humor. It afforded us a very comfortable haven of rest after a day exploring the country. Mr. R. has several thousand thrifty tomato plants, which he has started under glass.

“Vacaville has the appearance of a flourishing place for an inland town. Its excellent college, which we believe ranks high as an educational institution, seems to have

brought to the town a class of cultivated people that are not always to be found in large numbers in a newly settled village. The farming lands about generally seem well cultivated and productive.

“At Fairfield, the county seat, has a substantial courthouse but not very many other buildings of note. From there we took the stage for Benicia. Benicia presents some little stir of business, but the removal of the state capital was a stunning blow to the ambitious young city.”

Following is a description of Suisun and Fairfield that appeared in the Alta California, a newspaper published in San Francisco.

“This place is situated at the Suisun slough, three quarters of a mile from the town of Fairfield, the county seat. The population in the two places is about 800, Suisun being the largest. At Fairfield there is an elegant courthouse and a substantial jail. Also a neat brick church. There are several small hotels and boarding houses and quite a number of private dwellings.

“Among the first settlers in Suisun were Welch, Young, Owens, Wing and Moody. There are several public buildings: a Methodist church, a Catholic church and a public schoolhouse. There are two hotels: the Pacific House and the City Hotel, which are sufficiently large enough to accommodate 50 persons. There is also a restaurant. The post office and telegraph offices are in the same building. Nearly every trade and profession is represented.

‘In the months of August, September, and October, the place is crowded with teams from all sections of the county loaded with grain and fruit. Here are some neat one- and two-story dwelling houses and closed-in yards in which are seen the prickly pear of great size, weeping willow, Australian pine, cedar and elm trees, in addition to a variety of flowers. Quite a number of the houses are made of brick.

“Large stores in fire proof buildings and in a good business location rent from \$50 to \$100 and small dwellings for about \$12 per month. There is a fire engine in town with a well-organized fire company consisting of about 40 members. Near where the steamer Princess lands is one large fireproof warehouse 90-by-120 feet. There is a large brick flour mill a short distance from the wharf, capable of turning out 200 barrels of flour each day. The machinery is run by steam. What they call good crop is from 40 to 50 bushels wheat and a good crop of barley is from 70 to 80 bushels to the acre.”

The following article about Vacaville was also written by the correspondent from the Alta.

"Vacaville is situated in a beautiful and fertile valley about 10 miles NE of Suisun. To the west, a little distance from the town, the hills or mountains gradually rise to the height of about 500 feet. It is a beautiful valley, which is dotted with houses and large droves of cattle and horses. This is the location of the Vacaville Methodist School and College, which was established in 1861. At present there are 150 students. Rev. Mr. Lucky is the president.

"The population of this town and vicinity is about 300, their chief employment being farming. The soil is good. Barley, wheat, Indian corn and potatoes grow and yield well. Among the fruits raised here are apricots, peaches, apples, figs and grapes. Mr. Wilson, owner and proprietor of the Wilson House was (one of) the first American settler in town. His nearest neighbor at that time was 13 miles distance, this being the year 1850. At that period, deer, elk, antelope and bear roamed over the plain.

'There is now a drugstore, grocery stores, shoemakers, shops, harness makers, blacksmiths, etc. Free Masons and Old Fellows each have a lodge in town. There is but one church. Rev. Mr. Anderson is the pastor. They hold their service in the college building. Their Sunday school numbers 100.

"Good board and lodging is \$6 per week. When the farmers are putting in their crops and harvesting they pay about \$1 per day and board to their hands. A number of buildings here are made of brick. The brick kiln is about 2 miles from town. To give some idea of the value of a house and lot, we will state that in front of the college there is a small neat two-story house with two and one half acres of land, a good well of water, and several hundred grape vines valued at \$1,800. The fare from Vacaville to Suisun where the steamboat lands is \$1. From San Francisco up river is \$3.

"While on my way to Suisun, Dr. Dobbins overtook me on the road and kindly invited me to ride with him. During our 10-mile journey, he gave me much valuable information respecting the country. The doctor has resided in the town since 1850 and is now the owner of a large track of fertile land, all of which is under cultivation with the exception of some pastureland. Grapes grow in abundance. Dobbins, Allison, Davis, Wilson, Wolfskills and others have 98,000 grapevines.

"Dr. Dobbins is a spirited man and he offers to give a piece of land close by the town and in sight of the college to anyone who will erect a good wine press. He holds out the same offer to any party who will erect a wool factory or flour mill. The nearest mill now is 10 miles away. Some of the farmers are obliged to go 30 miles to have their grain converted into flour and meal. An abundance of water can be had by digging 10 feet. Wood can be bought or delivered for about \$4 per cord."

A Sacramento Union reporter came on Collinsville to reveal what he noted was a fraud

in advertising.

He said a "floridly written prospectus" detailed Collinsville's "unequaled advantages and a lithographed plat margined by imaginary houses contributed its pictorial aid to court the enterprising."

The facts, according to the reporter, were far below these expectations. There were a mere half dozen straggling houses and there was a general impression of "unthrift and desolation." Only those who attached value to partially submerged waste were encouraged to make inquiries. The reporter had an offer to locate on a lot on 33rd Street, which was said to be "centrally located." The lot occupied a "sand hill eminence."

"Commercial pursuits were limited to sturgeon fishing and geese and duck hunting, which were supplied to the San Francisco and Sacramento markets."

A veteran was pointed out to the reporter. "He was maimed in one arm, but was slaughtering 100 wild fowl a day. Every other day the wharf teemed with the trophies of local fishermen. A steam ferryboat ran between Collinsville and Antioch, a distance of 5 miles."

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