

# Looking back on days of Vacaville childhood

By Kristin Delaplane

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‘When I think of my childhood days spent in Vacaville, I feel sad and lonely again. I am sitting in the swing under the fig tree pushing forward then back, forward, then back. Once in a while a ripe fig falls to the ground with a loud smack! The ants run to taste of its sweetness. Far, far off I hear the crowing of a rooster. Then further yet, an answering crowing. Then vibrating silence!’

“Down the street comes ‘old Judge Buckly’ in his buggy, one foot hanging outside almost reaching the ground. The judge looks neither left or right, but flicks the old horse with the tip of his buggy whip to keep him in motion. As the sound of hoofs grows fainter and fainter, I start the swing in motion again, but I feel a lump in my throat and I begin to sob. I run into the house. I cannot answer my mother’s question: ‘What is it, my child?’ for I do not know the word ‘lonesome.’

“Finally, one day, I run into the house screaming, ‘I want to go to school like the others.’ So, at the beginning of the next school year, my mother arranged my long hair in curls, dressed me in a white embroidered ‘lawn’ dress, and off I went holding my father’s hand. But, alas, I am 5 and the classroom is crowded and the principal says I must wait until I am 6. Another year of lonesome waiting. Then happiness.

“My first grade teacher, Miss Meyers, was the first woman other than my mother that I had known well and I promptly fell in love with her. I adored her. I stayed after school so that I could look at her. I crept up to her desk and leaned against her. I remember everything she taught us. The parts of a flower: stamens, sepal, calyx and corolla. How to draw a circle on the blackboard. Diacritic marks and phonics. And, of course, reading, writing and singing. ‘Good Morning, Merry Sunshine’ and ‘Over in the Meadow.’

“There were 60 children in the class, but Miss Meyers was always gentle and sweet. She never raised her voice and all the children loved her. Years later, I wrote her telling her what an influence she had exerted on my life. Imagine my feelings when I received an answer saying she did not remember having had me as a pupil!

“My best friend during the next six years was Katie Howlett, who lived across the street. Every morning we walked the mile to school and walked home together. We used to fill our time writing stories and on our way home from school, we would read them to each other. In our stories we imagined ourselves married, to millionaires! ‘Last

night Laurence and I went to the opera. I wore my pink satin dress and my velvet coat of crushed strawberry color. The music was divine.'

"We used to play under the apple trees. Near the house grew two apple trees, which had been allowed to grow as tall and as wide as nature dictated. Beneath these trees were swings, a barrel-staved hammock, a seesaw and a merry-go-round. All were homemade. A few yards from the apple trees was the fruit shed where sacks of dried fruit, raisins and nuts were stored. Invariably we would end up eating some of the raisins and nuts.

"Not far from the apple trees was a huge white fig tree, a wonderful tree for climbing. Each of us had our own 'nest' in it. A nest was made by putting several boards across two limbs for a seat. Two more boards made a back. These boards were covered with old cushions and blankets and many hours were spent there reading, eating grapes, apples and other fruits that were in season. How we survived innumerable apples, grapes, cherries, peaches, pears, nuts and raisins that we consumed, can only be explained by the acceptance of the old saying: 'There is a special angel to watch over each little child.'

"Thumping apples was a popular pastime. We thought of a boy's name as we thumped the apple. Then we ate the apple counting every seed. The number of seeds in the apple determined if he loved you, if he courted you, if you would marry.

'To a child in Vacaville, one day was much like another. There were no rich people in this town. Everyone worked hard for the bare necessities and few knew any luxury. Our wardrobe was limited to a few everyday dresses and one Sunday outfit. When these required cleaning, it was done in a basin of gasoline (naptha) on the back porch. The carpets were swept with a broom and the wooden kitchen floor was scrubbed on hands and knees. The little heating stove in the dining room was never equal to the task of supplying the heat for the entire house. The cellar dug into the ground under the house was the only refrigeration we had. Light came from coil-oil lamps and transportation was by foot or horse and buggy. We walked to town over dusty or muddy roads to buy our food. At night the streets were lighted by 'arc lights' between long intervals of darkness. The faces of people under them became blue and unhealthy looking.

"Life in Vacaville was almost entirely without incident, but I saw balloon ascension once. A trapeze was suspended from the balloon and a man performed tricks while hanging from it almost 100 feet from the ground. When he hung by his heels, I looked the other way.

"The first automobile that came to town was in 1894. It was parked by the village watering trough, a bright red 'devil wagon.' I could hardly believe that it could travel

without horses. I never saw another automobile in Vacaville.

“On the Fourth of July we decorated the front of the house with red, white and blue bunting and waited endlessly for darkness to fall, so that we could shoot off the firecrackers, Roman candles, shooting stars and rockets. We only had a few of these, but by spacing the shots carefully we could make the show last a half an hour. Then we sued the firecrackers. By putting a large cracker under a tin can and lighting the extended fuse with a punk, we could make quite a noise. One year the local Chinese residents put on a real fireworks show and I thought I had never seen anything so beautiful.

“Perhaps the most fun we had was at Christmas time. On Christmas Eve we took part in the church program. Christmas carols were sung, recitations were delivered with the appropriate gestures and then in a moment of silence, the jingle of the sleigh bells was heard in the vestibule and the door opened and in ran Santa Claus with his pack on his back.

“Up onto the platform he ran, pranced around the Christmas tree calling out jolly greetings to one and all. From the sack came bags of candy, one for each child. These bags were made of a mesh cloth in the shape of a stocking, bound around the edge with colored wool yard. Each bag contained candy, nuts and popcorn of such superior flavor and fragrance that nothing has ever equaled it since then.

“Our celebration at home was even more wonderful. A few days before, my father and the boys took a long walk to Old Rocky, a wooded hill, which we called a mountain. They cut a small tree of fir or laurel or some other fragrant wood. This was nailed to a stand and set on the middle of the floor in the parlor. Then the door was locked and the window shades were pulled down for the next few days. Mother went in and out, carrying things under her apron and carefully closing the door behind her. One year the window shade stopped a few inches from the windowsill and by standing on a few piled-up boxes, it was possible to peek into the room. The tree was trimmed with beautiful shiny ornaments, strings of popcorn and small colored candles, each in its own holder. On the floor were packages.

“At last, Christmas morning arrived. There were seven of us and we joined hands and danced around the tree singing, ‘Merry, Merry Christmas.’ Then Christmas dinner. Turkey, cranberries, mince and pumpkin pies. One year my brother in exuberance took a piece of white chalk and printed on the inside of the oven door: ‘Turkeys good in this oven.’ My mother never removed that expression of appreciation.

“The young people had occasional surprise parties, bringing plentiful supplies of sandwiches, cake and candy. Post office was a popular game at these parties and

there was singing and piano playing.

“On Saturday nights it was the custom for the inhabitants of town and the surrounding country to take their buggies or walk to Main Street, which was about two blocks. At one end of the street was the bandstand where the local musical talent regaled the crowd with such tunes as ‘Stars and Stripes Forever.’ The ice cream store was very popular on these hot summer nights. An ice cream soda cost 10 cents.

“Occasionally some speaker or performer would come to town and the inhabitants en masse would turn out for the occasion. Once it was a whistler, who could imitate bird calls. Once it was a group of ‘cake walkers’ who danced while leaning backwards. Or it might be a minstrel show. The Quaker Brothers came one time. Four brothers who wore gray and white Quaker costumes and their purpose was to sell patent medicines. To entice patrons, they would give a show. During intermissions, they walked up and down the aisles hawking their wares. Tape Worm Cure was one of their best sellers. To prove its efficacy they displayed jars containing preserved tapeworms and told all the symptoms that one might have to profit by the ‘cure.’ My father brought me some freckle soap, as I had a fair sprinkling of freckles on my nose and worried about them. Alas, the freckles proved stronger than the soap.

“The church socials were another form of entertainment. The main feature of these parties was consuming the luscious sandwiches, cakes and ice cream that the guests brought. Sometimes they sang songs or recited pieces. If there was a piano in the home, someone would play. Or someone would bring his banjo. For many of the young people, the best part was the ride home in the horse-drawn buggy.”

Suggestions and local historical information for this column are welcome. Write biographer-historian Kristin Delaplane in care of The Reporter, 916 Cotting Lane, Vacaville 95688.

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