

Adam Willis was a 'pioneer of pioneers'

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, June 07, 1998

'Strength, perseverance and courage describe the life of one of Solano County's earliest African-American pioneers, Adam Willis. In the antebellum era - the period before the Civil War - success for African-Americans was extremely rare and limited. Adam Willis was one of these success stories and his story has its roots in Solano County.

"Willis was born in Missouri in April 1824. In August 1836, his half sister, Marion Willis, was born. Marion was known as 'Mary Ann' and she and Adam were raised in the same household and formed a tight bond.

"Shortly before 1845 at the age of 21 Adam was either inherited or bought by a Maj. Singleton Vaughn. Vaughn was born in Kentucky in 1801. When Adam came to his household, Vaughn was living in Saline County, Mo. At this point, Adam was separated from his sister, but as he departed he gave her his promise that someday he would come back for her.

"Living in the Vaughn household, Adam became a trusted slave and when in 1846 Maj. Vaughn decided to venture West, he took his trusted servant with him on this 1,500-mile overland journey. Once they reached California, they first settled in Woodland. At some point, they apparently relocated to Benicia where Singleton Vaughn was voted as the county assessor to serve from 1851 to 1853."

Apparently well pleased with the area, Vaughn returned to Missouri for his family. Once back in Missouri, arrangements were made for the return trek to California in the year 1852. Adam Willis at the age of 23 was put in charge of the ox team for that long journey. After the return trip to Solano County, Maj. Singleton Vaughn, 51, and his family settled on a farm two miles northwest of Benicia. The family consisted of Joseph P., 22, Cynthia, 18, Ruth, 15, Singleton, Jr., 12, Stephen, 9, and Sarahel B., 6. Adam Willis remained with the family in that place until he was given his freedom sometime before 1855.

The Vaughn family continued to live on their ranch in Benicia. In 1857, Vaughn placed an ad in the newspaper offering a \$10 reward for the recovery of a strayed or stolen black American mule. The mule had been missing since November 1856. The 1860 census report showed two people living in the Singleton household; the major, aged 60, who was listed as a farmer and Sarahel, a 14-year-old boy. The value of Vaughn's real

estate was \$2,000 and his personal estate was listed as \$20,000.

In the years after Adam Willis was given his freedom until the end of the Civil War, Willis found work as a cook. He worked for some prominent families in the Suisun City area. This included being in the employ of Josiah Wing, founder of Suisun City, and for J.B. Lemon (two brothers, John and James had raised cattle and hand a prominent general merchandise business in Suisun City).

Through his industry, Adam accumulated a small savings, and soon after the Civil War ended in 1865, he resolved to make good his promise to find his sister, Mary Ann. On Sept. 27, 1867, he placed ad in the San Francisco Elevator (an African-American newspaper) seeking any information on the whereabouts of his sister. "Information wanted of Marion Willis who, when last heard from was in Ray County, Missouri. Any information of her whereabouts will be thankfully received by her brother, Adam Willis, at Suisun City. Philadelphia and New York papers please copy one month and send bill to The Elevator office."

This enterprising effort brought no result, so Adam set off for Missouri in search of his sister, his only living relative, whom he had not seen for 20 years.

Adam reached Missouri and the search was on. It took him four exhausting years, but he finally did locate his sister. She had married a Mr. Fann and had at least four children and one grandchild. Her husband had died and so in 1871, Adam brought the family back to Fairfield. This family unit took up residence in a house on Texas Avenue located between Taylor and Madison streets.

In 1873, Adam Willis was named in The Elevator, as was the town of Dixon: "As we remarked . . . we were agreeably disappointed in Dixon. We expected to find a dull, sleepy little place, but it is a real live town. It has two hotels, several groceries and provision stores, dry goods and variety stores, two bakeries, two barbers, two butchers, saloons, three churches, a public school, post and express offices and the inevitable follower of California civilization - a Chinese wash-house - besides several mechanical branches such as blacksmiths, carpenters, wheelwrights, etc. they talk of opening a bank in Dixon and establishing a newspaper. We don't think there is much chance for the latter, for the 'live paper' man has been around. We saw several of the (San Francisco) Chronicle's gift maps and everybody likes 'em. We also saw a number of Gus DeYoung's Map Directories of Solano County.

"We met an old acquaintance in Dixon - Fred Morris. He used to fold papers for us in Francis & Valentine pressroom some years ago. He is married and settled. He keeps the most fashionable saloon in Dixon and his doing a good business.

"While enjoying the bachelor hospitalities of Ned Hutton another old friend of his stop'd to see him on his way to Suisun. His name is Adam Willis. He's an old California. He went East in 1866 and returned after an absence of four years. Hutton made ample provisions for his guests. He prepared a fine dinner, accompanied by champagne and other beverages, and all the luxuries Dixon market afforded and we enjoyed ourselves hugely until bedtime.

"Next morning Hutton prepared a capital breakfast of which we partook with great satisfaction and at 7:45 we took the train for San Francisco.

"We left Mr. Willis in Suisun and returned home in due time much pleased with our visit to Dixon."

For the next 30 years, Adam found employment in the area as a cook for various families, hotels and threshing outfits. In the mid 1880s, he was a cook at the Solano County Hospital in Fairfield. In all his jobs, Willis was commended for his faithfulness and industry. All this time his sister and her children lived with Adam. By the turn of the century, the family group had grown to include two great nephews, Ralph (born 1896) and Raymond (born 1894) Sinclair. These two boys attended school in Fairfield during the early 1900s. The whole family was able to read and write, and by at least the year 1900 Adam owned the house on Texas free of mortgage.

At this time, 1900, Mary's son David worked as farm laborer. Matilda worked as a house servant. Charles B. worked as a day laborer. It was in this year that Adam was stricken with paralysis and was quite sick for the next two years. He died in his home November 20, 1902, at the age of 78. He had been a resident of Solano County for over 50 years. His funeral at the People's Methodist Church in Fairfield was widely attended and he was buried in the Fairfield-Suisun Cemetery.

His obituary appeared in the Solano Republican where it was noted that he was one of the few African-Americans to settle in Solano County in the 19th Century and as such was indeed a "pioneer of pioneers." In part the account in the newspaper read as follows: "Everyone in the community knew 'Uncle Adam,' as he was familiarly known and the fact that so large a number of people attended was evidence of the esteem in which he was held." This was followed by a eulogy written by a fellow pioneer: "The decease of 'Uncle' Adam Willis is deserving of more than a passing notice being a pioneer of pioneers and of exemplary character."

In the time Adam Willis had lived in Solano County, he gained the respect of the community. This is shown by the fact that his former employer, Josiah Wing, acted as Willis' surety, or a person who agrees to be responsible for another by assuming their responsibilities or debts in the event of default. Grace Wing was a subscribing witness

to his will in which he left his entire estate to his sister, Mary Fann.

Mary Fann passed away in 1907. She was the great-grandmother of Ralph and Raymond Sinclair. Their mother was Hazel Fann (daughter of one of Mary's children). Hazel left the home by 1900. At that point Mary adopted the boys. The boys' father was David Armstead Sinclair, who was born and raised in the Napa Valley. David's father and maternal grandparents were ex-slaves, who had settled in the Napa Valley in the 1850s. Most of that family left the Napa Valley in the late 1870s to resettle in Chico.

Mary Fann's descendants continued to live in California obtaining success in college and graduate schools and in many varying fields.

Research into the Adam Willis family is an ongoing project, particularly concerning Raymond and Ralph Sinclair. Contact Duane Alexander Vick at (650) 225-8830 or by e-mail at duanev@gene.com with any information on the family. 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, or e-mail her at ohistory@masterpiecememoirs.com. Also read the column by clicking on The Reporter web site at 63.192.157.117 or the California Historical Society web site at www.calhist.org.

Catastrophic storms are nothing new for Rio Vista, Maine Prairie

The quoted information for this piece came from an article by Carl Nolte of the San Francisco Chronicle, 5/27/1998.

This has been the rainiest season of the century in the Bay Area, but the all-time record was set back in 1862. That season 49.27 inches of rain fell in San Francisco - 24.36 inches in January alone.

"In 1862, it was the Babe Ruth of downpours, the Mount Everest of rainfall, an event scientists say could only occur once in a thousand years."

That year, 1862, was the year Mother Nature struck Rio Vista and Maine Prairie with a fury. The winter of 1861 had brought torrential rains. It rained day and night for days on end. This caused the flooding of a portion of Rio Vista so severe that some buildings simply were washed away. But the worst was yet to come.

On Jan. 9, 1862, the rain came down in torrents with floods reaching 12 feet. These waters crested and produced waves that pounded the remaining buildings, knocking them down.

The wharf could not withstand the onslaught and it also was washed away. The town's pioneers quickly gathered what they could and made a hasty flight to the nearest knoll. There they waited several days in the pounding rain to be rescued by a steamer.

Maine Prairie was hit by the same storm. They said the brutal storm raged, lashing out and howling like a wild animal. Ultimately a seething sea beset the town center and beyond - destroying everything in its path. The tale was that not even a stick was left behind to mark the spot where the town had been. It is certain the damage and loss was great. For three days water stood 12-feet deep. Businesses and merchants in the town suffered crippling losses. Farmers who had their hay and grain stored in the town's warehouses were devastated. The cattle and sheep ranchers were ruined as all their stock drowned in the savage flood water.

Both towns rebuilt. The remaining denizens of Rio Vista sent an inquiry to Gen. Vallejo about the weather situation. He responded that 20 years prior, the rains had caused flooding in that area. In fact, he had sailed right across the Los Ulpinos Grant on his way to Benicia. The citizens asked local rancher Joseph Bruning about relocating on his ranch and he agreed. This is where the town of Rio Vista is situated today.

In Maine Prairie, some people rebuilt on the original site, but this time they built on stilts. Others opted to build where the land was more elevated on the Lewis ranch. The widow Rebecca Lewis, a Scot, laid out a new town on her land, which was about a quarter of a mile from the old town site. She named the new town Alton. The town was settled but the name Alton never took hold.

"In 1862, the rains flooded the entire Central Valley, producing a lake said to be 250 to 300 miles long and 20 to 30 miles wide. . . . The entire city of Sacramento was under water for three months.

"The disaster, 136 years ago was due to - El Nino. In January, a deluge of warm rain melted the snowpack. . . . The rivers rose and rose and flooded Marysville, Yuba City, Colusa, Stockton and other towns.

"The flood was made even worse by the mining practices of the late Gold Rush era. In those days, mining entrepreneurs used huge hoses called monitors to wash away whole hillsides in search of gold . . . producing riverbeds full of mud, rock and debris.

"There were no dams or river bypasses . . . no flood control projects at all. When the floodwaters reached the Golden Gate, the ocean was stained brown far into the Pacific. San Francisco Bay was colored brown well into that summer."

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