

Pena Adobe has a colorful history

By Kristin Delaplane

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The Pena Adobe, a registered historical landmark, was the original home of Juan Felipe Pena, one of the first European settlers in the area in the 1840s. Today the city of Vacaville along with the Vacaville Heritage Council is working on making repairs and upgrading the environment so that the artifacts that relate to the adobe's heritage may be safely housed there. Volunteers are wanted for this project. The goal is to bring the adobe up to the standards of a quality museum-like structure and then maintain regular hours with volunteer docents.

The Pena Adobe has three rooms on the ground floor and a full-length attic. The overall dimensions are 18 feet by 50 feet, about the size of a modern-day two car garage. The walls, which are about two feet thick, are made entirely of adobe bricks. The original hewn redwood joists still support the ceiling. Door and window lintels also are redwood, which it is believed were hauled by oxen or mule teams from the hills near Napa.

Modern-day excavations at the site uncovered finds revealing the existence of American Indians at this choice location. In addition, to artifacts having to do with every day life, this also was a known burial site for the Indians. These finds are now on display at the Mowers Goheen Museum, which is next to the adobe. The adobe is situated on Pena's share of a Spanish land grant that he had in partnership with Manuel Vaca. They called the land grant Rancho Los Putos, and it was a total of 44,386 acres stretching roughly from the Suisun River to Putah Creek and from the Sacramento River to the foothills.

In 1841 the Pena and Vaca families came here by way of the Old Spanish trail. The Pena family consisted of Pena's wife Isabella and their six children. When they arrived on their land to build their dwelling, the labor force consisted of an American Indian crew, which prepared sun-baked adobe bricks for the construction. Redwood lumber was used to build the doors and door frames, the few windows and ceiling beams.

While the adobe was being built, the family stayed at the Sonoma mission. The route they traveled to and from Sonoma became known as "Pena Pass." This trail led over the hills and came out at "Laguana Valley." The adobe was completed in 1842 and was immediately occupied by the family. This adobe, though changed and remodeled over the years, was occupied by members of the Pena family up to 1920. It was not the spacious Spanish ranch house of film lore. Pena's home was of modest size. In the early days, cooking was done outdoors. The bake oven was huge - big enough to hold

a full-sized pig. Fire pits were set up with rocks and here the kettles and other cooking vessels were placed with good things to be cooked. In addition, large kettles hung over open fires. Bread was baked in a Dutch oven. It is supposed there was a thatched-roof lean-to over the kitchen to protect the cooking area and the cook from the winter wind and rain and the summer heat.

In the course of this time, the adobe was remodeled at least three times. In the 1840s or early 1850s the tule-thatched roof was replaced with hand-split shake. In the 1880s, the home was enlarged and "modernized." This included having the entire building encased in wood sheathing. Around that time the frame of the inside walls were improved with plastering. Porches around the house were enclosed to form four additional rooms for the growing family.

These rooms, however, did not have doors into the main house. While the main house was heated with terra cotta charcoal burners, these additional rooms, being cut off from the main house, they were heated with wood-burning stoves.

Several generations were born and raised in the adobe and artifacts still remain to indicate the details of day-to-day life. With no general store nearby, the Penas' lifestyle stressed self-sufficiency. They made their own rawhide chairs. Prior to 1888 a proper kitchen and dining room were added. A well was dug beneath the kitchen floor and a hand pump was installed for easy delivery of water. In the 1880s, a drilled, cased well and pump could be installed for \$35.

There was no indoor plumbing, so outhouses were built. There were also several wells outside for household use, for the laborers and for use around the barn areas. Buildings around the home were barns, a blacksmith shop and two or three bunkhouses for the work crews, who were busy running cattle, raising grain and eventually growing fruit.

Juan Felipe died in 1861 leaving the adobe to his only daughter, Nestora Pena Rivera. His wife Isabella stayed at the adobe until her death in 1884.

Nestora left the adobe in 1918 to live the rest of her days in Vacaville. Maria Dolores Pena Lyon lived in the adobe until 1920. Maria deeded the adobe to her children in 1947. By the 1950s the adobe stood as an abandoned ruin in a meadow overgrown with weeds and neglected trees and shrubbery. The old adobe walls, for so many years protected by the encasing wood siding, became exposed and the south wall collapsed. In 1957, the Pena family sold it to Solano County Supervisors Delberet Mowers and William Goheen. Mowers and Goheen then deeded it along with one and a half acres to the Solano County Historical Society. Title was turned over to the city of Vacaville in 1961. At that time donations were taken and under the supervision of Merle Curtice, restoration of the adobe was instituted. About 70 inmates from the California Medical

Facility were employed for this undertaking and the work was completed in 1965. The only bit of construction not restored to the original was the tule-thatch roof.

The adobe was designated in full restoration enclosed by a park setting. Besides picnic and recreation facilities, other notable features of the park are the Willis Linn Jepson Memorial Garden of native plants; the Indian Council Ground and a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

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