

Freitas recalls family's trek to Solano County

By Kristin Delaplane

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Former butcher Edward "Bud" Ralph Freitas has his roots in Portugal. Both his grandfathers came to America from the Azores. His paternal grandfather, John Lewis Freitas arrived in the 1870s and is written up in Solano County history.

Today Bud Freitas is a retired bail bondsman living with his wife Mary Lou in the Suisun Valley where he raises racing pigeons, sells eggs to the public and grows a variety of fruits - apples, peaches, apricots, cherries, English walnuts, persimmons, figs and prunes.

Following, the first in a series, is an interview of Freitas by Kristin Delaplane about the family's history in the Fairfield Meat Market.

Freitas: My father's name was John. When I was born in 1914, my name was John, but they changed it because my dad said maybe the mail would get mixed up. So I became Edward. But my son is John and my grandson is John.

I have never been to the Azores. I have no desire. I was born and raised here and I want to be an American. My people came from the Azores when they were just young men, 18, 19, 20 years old.

Q: Tell me about your grandparents.

A: On my father's side, my grandfather, John Lewis Freitas, was born in 1850 on the island of Flores, Azores, Portugal. He left the Azores in 1868 when he was just 18 on account of at that time, when you reached the age of 18, you had to go into the service. He shipped out on a whaling ship for three years. When his time was up, he returned to Portugal briefly and then came to Boston. From there he worked his way on a ship to come around the Horn to San Francisco, arriving in 1871.

In California he got work shearing sheep, which he knew how to do. He did that in Solano County and Fresno, all up and down California. Then he heard they were paying 1 cent a head more for shearing sheep in Utah. Here they were getting about 5 cents a head. They could get 6 cents in Idaho. So he went to Utah and sheared sheep there.

When the shearing season was over, a Mormon offered him a job as a sheepherder for

his flock of sheep near Salt Lake. He did that for about three or four years. It was open range way back then and because he had such good results - his death loss was very low on the lambs - that after the second year, the Mormon offered him a partnership on the sheep. When it came to splitting whatever they made after they paid the costs, instead of taking it all in money, he took some female lambs, which he took care of along with the regular flock. In a few years he had 500 to 600 head sheep of his own.

Around that time, the government opened up land in Wyoming for homesteading and he drove his herd of sheep to Evanston, Wy., to get his own ranch. Then, in 1879, he went back to the Azores and got himself a wife, my grandmother Mary Rosa, and brought her back to Wyoming.

Q: Was this someone he had known back in the Azores?

A: I wouldn't know. Anyway, they had three children - Joe, John Lewis (my father), and Mary. After a number of years living in Wyoming, he sold the ranch there on account of the fact that his wife had asthma real bad in the cold weather. They sold all the sheep and came to Solano County. He bought 1,000 acres where Travis Air Base is, where the hospital used to be. He paid \$4,000 or \$4 an acre.

The first gas that came into Fairfield was piped from his ranch. He had sheep on that ranch for a while, too. When his wife died in 1910, he rented the ranch out and retired. A year later, 1911, he went back to Portugal for a second wife, Annie Doceo. They lived in Fairfield. The house, has been up for sale. It is at 947 Missouri Street and much like it was when I was a kid. He had a second family with Annie.

On my mother's side of the family, her father was Joseph Gerevas. He and his wife lost three children in the Azores, health conditions being so bad over there. In 1873, my grandfather came here and after three years when he got enough money, he brought my grandmother over. He built a house in Fairfield at the location of 1047 Empire.

Joseph was a contractor in the sheep shearing business. He'd get the jobs and have all these other fellows work for him. They'd shear sheep as far as Redding. In those days everyone traveled by horse and buggy and they'd be gone for months with their horses and buggies.

Every time he had the money, he would buy another lot in Fairfield, about \$50 in those days. He had quite a few lots and he gave lots to his children. My grandparents had two boys and three girls. My mother, Josephine, was born in Fairfield. So was their son Joe Gerevas. Joe, the son, was the mayor in Fairfield from 1924 to 1936. My dad was mayor of Fairfield, too.

I don't think my grandfathers got along with one another. I heard one time that they thought my father had married below his status. Her parents didn't have as much money as his folks did. That's how people were.

My father was 14 or 15 years when he came here with the family from Wyoming. He went to school here and took dance lessons. Around the turn of the century, when he was out of school, his father put him and his brother Joe in the dry goods business in the city of Suisun, where they ran a store. They weren't in it too many years. My dad was hard to get along with. He had to be the boss.

After that my dad was partners on the old Waterman Ranch running a dairy farm. He wasn't in that too long before he went off in business on his own. That's when he went into the meat business. It was the early 1920s when he bought a meat market in Fairfield. It was the Fairfield Meat Market and it was always half groceries and half meat market. He bought it from Roy Swasey's grandfather. (In 1857, a Samuel S. Swasey had a painting, glazing and paper hanging shop in Suisun City. In 1883, H.M. Swasey operated the street-sprinkling wagon in Vacaville and the next year was he was operating a nursery, selling fruit trees.)

I used to go with my dad when I was only 6, 7 years old when he'd buy and slaughter the animals. My dad would buy a steer from Hugh Miller. Hugh Miller owned the ranch that had been Capt. Waterman's. We'd go out there just before dusk, and my dad would butcher the animal. Then he'd pull it up in one of those old eucalyptus trees out there with a block and tackle to let the animal cool off overnight. When the sun went down, the wind blew here and the flies were asleep. We'd be out there early before the sun came up and bring the meat down to take it into the meat market.

We used to go to all the ranches over at Grizzly Island, my dad and I, with the horse and buggy, to look at the cattle and animals that he was going to buy. We used to get across the Montezuma Slough on the Grizzly Island ferry; the ferry operated a cable by which it was pulled back and forth.

The big ranch out there belonged to an old maid, Kellogg. She had a bookkeeper, who worked for her for years and years, by the name of Alexander. They called it the Alexander & Kellogg Ranch. When they both died, Richard Wilson inherited the ranch. His father had worked for Miss Kellogg for years as foreman when they were raising asparagus out there. They never had any cattle. It was all farming. We used to go past them to the other ranchers that had cattle.

Q: Would he always butcher the animals on the ranches?

A: In those days, we butchered a lot of them that way. There was no inspection. Later

on, when the inspection came in, my dad built slaughterhouses. Back in 1918 or 1919, he built the first slaughterhouse on a ranch out where Tabor Avenue is. It's a park now, just before the railroad tracks. Later he built another slaughterhouse at the end of the Parker Ranch. That's across Walters Road. The foundation is still there. There're a few trees out there now that mark the spot.

Then in 1930, he bought a ranch over on what was Highway 12 and built a slaughterhouse there. That's on Scandia Road at the south entrance to Travis Air Force Base. Just before the gate, on the right you can see the remaining buildings from the ranch. He paid \$12,000 for that was 320 acres. I lived out there when I was first married in 1934. The little house is still standing.

Q: Tell me a bit more about the butchering process prior to the slaughterhouse.

A: Back then you didn't shoot the beef. They used a big, long iron tool, like a crowbar, that had a forked point on the end. They used to hit the animal with that right behind the head where the spinal cord connects with the head. It would go through the skin, sever the spinal cord and the animal would fall and die. Then you would cut its throat. Later we got a .22-caliber long rifle and that's what we used for the pigs, calves and sheep. We'd hit the sheep on the head with a sledgehammer right before shooting it. When you butcher a beef, you have to shoot it first and then cut its throat.

If you're out in the country, you have to have a clean place where you lay it on its back on boards to skin it. You'd skin most of the animal and then you have to pull them up in the air with a block and tackle to finish skinning it. When you were done, and the animal was all the way up off of the ground, you'd wash it all off good with water. Then you split it down the back in half with a big cleaver. After that, you'd pull it up as high as you could, way up under the tree, so no animals could get hold of it. You'd come back the next morning and drop it into your wagon or truck and take it into the meat market.

Q: The purpose of hanging it was . . . ?

A: So it would cool off. That's why it had to be split; so it would cool off and get dry and firm so you could handle it. We had a cooler - just an icebox - at the market we put it in.

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