

Tracing ranch ties through generations

By Kristin Delaplane

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'My mother's grandfather, John Wesley Hill, came from Missouri in 1847. He rode up here when the oats would come up to the top of the horse's back. He says, 'That's good enough for me,' and he squatted on some land. His main thing was raising cattle.

"When Pena and Vaca got in their big quarrel, Vaca sold his adobe to Hill. The Hill family would live in that adobe until they built their own home. That home is still there off Cherry Glen Road. You can see it from the freeway, that white house. My mother and father were married there in 1906.

"Hill went back to Missouri and brought a wife, Ann, out here. When Ann got here, she didn't like the living conditions in that adobe, so she lived in a hotel in Sacramento until her husband made the adobe suitable. They made a family of four boys and two girls. My mother's father, Caldwell, married one of the girls. They moved down to Bakersfield, where my mother was born.

"When my mother was 9, she and some kids were riding in a small wagon when the horses got spooked and took off. She pushed the other kids out the back, but she was thrown out against a tree and badly injured her leg. She had to come up to San Francisco, where they put a silver plate in her leg. From then on she had to stay close to the doctors in San Francisco, so she moved in with her Hill grandparents here in Vacaville.

"Now my grandfather on my father's side was James Nathan Rogers. He grew up in New York. When he was 7, both his parents died from (tuberculosis) and his uncle was his guardian. When Nathan was 14, they thought he was coming down with TB. In those times, the cure was sea breezes, so his uncle put him on a sailing vessel headed for San Francisco.

"When Nathan got back to New York, he started working in offices and when he got enough money he headed back for San Francisco.

"When he came to San Francisco, he got a job in an office. The year was 1879 or so.

"He came up to Vacaville on one of those real estate excursions: They'd bring people up to show them the fruit orchards and the land that was for sale. He bought a fruit

ranch, 150 acres, in Pleasants Valley. He was married soon after that to Jane Kirk, and they moved to the ranch.

“He became very successful. I think he was a good manager. He got people to work for him who knew about growing fruit. Pretty near every year he was buying another ranch, including this ranch. One ranch was where Will C. Wood School is.

“He built a house in town on the site where the Vacaville Museum is today, and his foremen moved out to the ranch. My grandfather retired at age 50 and moved to Berkeley in 1911. All the property here he turned over to my father’s care. My father was the oldest of three sons.

“When my father and mother got married, they moved to this ranch. This house was built in 1918. My parents had three boys. I’m the middle one.

“My brothers and I liked the ranch. We were real ruffians. It was a fight to get us dressed in those high-button shoes and those short pants. When we started school, we went by horse and buggy. My older brother drove us.

“We did a lot of work on the ranch. My job was to milk the cow every day. We all had to cut fruit for drying in the summer. As teenagers, we made the crates and pasted on the labeling. Of course this was all the horse work at that time. We were always wanting to drive a team, but we had to wait until we were about 16. Then we hauled the boxes of fruit from the orchards out to the dehydrator with a team and a wagon. We thought we were big men then.

“Fruit ranching was very profitable for my father, until the Depression. When the Depression came, my father got hurt financially. It was terrible. He had to borrow all kinds of money from the bank. It kept him in misery for many years.

“The big day here was about 1944. My father sat down with us and burned the mortgage! It’s a dirty shame that it took the war to bring us the needed profit.

“Before the Depression I went to the Menlo Junior College and then I got into Stanford and went a year. My grandfather was helping me out and when he passed away, I had to quit and go to work. My first job was with Mr. Wright from the Buck Co. He ran an apple-packing shed in Sebastapol, and I made a contract with him to do all the loading of the rail cars.

“When that was over, a guy came out here to the ranch and wanted me to go to work at the Pacific Fruit Exchange in town. Pacific Fruit Exchange bought out Frank H. Buck’s business. All my buddies who had finished college were taking any kind of job.

Here I was offered a fairly good salary, \$125 a month. That was 1933. I worked there for 20 years. By my third year, I was in charge of the place.

“At Pacific Fruit Exchange our job was to load the rail cars. Then they expanded to a packing shed, where we packed the farmers’ fruits. The company did the marketing, too. We had to treat the customers the right way. From the time they brought their fruit down there, we had to pack it, ship it and sell it. If they got good results, they would be steady customers.

“I left the company in 1948. The company was cutting back. I didn’t need the job, and it was either me or others would go. I was a little tired of it, too. I came back and took on more and more work on the ranch.

“When Solano Irrigation came in, I bought the right-of-ways for a while and then I became the director. That was in the early ‘60s. I held that position for 26 years. My main job was to hire people and see that they did their job.

“My father was active up to about 1963. By then I was living in Suisun Valley. When Vera and I married, we moved into her house down there. I was an old man when we got married, 37. We had one boy, Charles, and she had two boys by her first marriage. When my father passed away, 1975, we came up here and took care of my mother for the next nine years, and I was running this ranch.

“When my father died, the inheritance tax wiped us out. The will wasn’t properly done and my brother and I had to take out a loan, \$80,000 apiece. I learned from that. My son Charles has the ranch now. I’m not going to get caught again!

“We’re located right on an edge of a town. Developers look at this land, but I made a promise long ago to my father that as long as I live I wouldn’t sell it. I’m not putting that on my son, but if I hadn’t stuck my ground, this whole valley would have gone into housing.

“The only thing I say is it’s good land. A lot of people prophesy the country will go hungry. Why put the houses on the good land? This is Class 1 soil. The topsoil goes down about 10 feet here.

“But as years go on, people pass away and the land changes hands. A lot of this land has been handed down and they’re not interested in farming. That’s the way the world’s going.”

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