Ranchers carve homestead from wilderness

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, April 04, 1999

“In 1892, William Henry Samuels homesteaded this ranch, which is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Part of the ranch is in Napa County. When they first moved up here it was mostly brush and rocks and they raised sheep. The sheep were slaughtered right here and the meat taken down to town. Deer meat was also something you could sell. The Samuels men liked horses and cattle, but the fencing is really, really hard to do here and the cattle became very wild. They got into the brush and were almost impossible to get out.

“The men cut the brush by hand and moved the rocks with mule teams and when that was accomplished, they planted table grapes. Because the grapes were a great attraction to the deer and other wild animals, they planted prune orchards. The fruit was picked, dipped in a lye bath and laid out on trays to dry in the sun. They were also a great attraction to the deer and 50 or 60 years ago, they started planting walnuts.

“William and his wife had nine children. The boys were the backbone of the ranch, but the girls also helped with the crops. Part of the family’s income came from cutting wood in Wragg Canyon. The family spent some of the winter down there so the children could go to school at the Capel Valley School. In later years, Blue Mountain School was built up here. They had a potbelly stove, and Shad’s brothers told me about putting shotgun shells in the stove so they would start popping off. Some of the girls moved to Vacaville for high school.

“William Samuels hired a young girl as a live-in maid to help his wife with the housework and the children. It was a hard life. It was handwashing, cooking was done on the hot wood stoves and they did all their own canning and preserving.

“When William moved to his other ranch in the Monticello area, he turned this ranch over to his son, Archie. In 1906, Archie married 16-year-old Mary Black Smith, who came from a neighboring ranch. They had 11 children. Alfred “Shad” Whitney Samuels, my husband, was born in 1925. He was the last, the baby. All the children worked on the ranch with the crops and, in the early 1900s, they still had some sheep and cattle.

“Quite a few people had ranches here then. The Stephesons were next door. There was the Black Ranch, which was Mary’s family’s ranch. The Morascos had apples. Mr. Morasco would take the apples to town in a wagon and peddle them door to door.
The Pashoras: Shad's mother helped bring into the world almost all the Pashora children. The Fisher and Cox families were all here, too. That's when they built the school. The teacher lived with a family up here and was charged a little bit on room and board.

“People up here used to go to town down Mix Canyon in a wagon with a mule team. I imagine it took two hours. It's a half-hour now. They would start out early so the animals wouldn’t get too hot. Shad showed me where they stopped and watered the mules.

“When you took something down the mountain, you brought something back. We would take in a load of walnuts or wood and come back with hay or gas. They had an old wastepaper basket set up by the gate for the families up here. It would have outgoing mail and notes. ‘If you’re going to town, please pick up some flour and sugar.’ It was usually the staples, because they had milk cows, chickens for their eggs and they canned their fruits, vegetables and even their meat.

“A great treat for the young people was the funny papers. Whoever went to town and got the funny papers would leave them in the basket. They were passed from one ranch to another.

’Some people up here had cars early on, but most of them into the ’30s kept a team of horses, too. It was just easier. You don’t just run down to the gas station when you’re out of gas. You have to bring it up in the barrels.

“You didn’t go to town to the movies, so they had gatherings; first at the schoolhouse and then later they built a big barn they called the dance hall at the Fisher Ranch on the Solano side. The families here would go and any company they might have. In those days, when people came to visit, they wouldn't just stay for 10 minutes. They’d stay overnight or for a week. A lot of those people played music. Music and dancing was just a part of their life.

“Shad’s uncle had a fiddle and when Shad was just 6, he picked it up and started playing. He could play something he’d heard. That uncle got him a violin. Shad played violin, mandolin, and guitar, all by ear.

“When my children were small, my mother, my sister and sometimes my brothers would come up for Christmas. Shad would play the guitar and we’d sing. He played really well, but none of us sang that well. He’d say, ‘I’m trying to find what key you’re in.’ We’d say, ‘Never mind. Just play!’ My daughters are also gifted. Diana plays the flute and banjo, and she played the violin. Kathy’s always played the guitar and a little piano. I play the radio and sometimes I can’t find the station.
“Shad went to the Blue Mountain School, but they closed it for lack of children when he was in the third-grade. That was all the schooling he had. However, he was a very intelligent man and his writing and his math skills were outstanding. He could figure things in his head that I, as a university graduate, had trouble figuring out on paper.

“Archie died, of a heart attack I think, when Shad was 10 or 12 and Shad and his mother moved out by Browns Valley. Most of the children were grown up by then and it would have been too hard for her to live here by herself. But she kept the ranch.

“After Shad got out of the service, he started a hay hauling business and he cut and sold wood. That’s when we met. He hauled hay to the ranch where my father was the foreman. While I didn’t know Shad until then, the Samuels family has always known my family. His brothers were a lot older than Shad and they used to go hunting with my brothers.

My father worked on the Lewis Pierce Ranch and the Toobey Brother ranches. He was usually a foreman. He worked with cattle and horses. He worked with a team of horses making Mix Canyon Road. He could do things with horses that other people couldn’t. My mother did the cooking for the ranch crew.

“We were married and when Shad’s mother died in the ‘60s, he inherited the ranch and we moved up here. We farmed prunes and walnuts. Some people seem to know what the land requires and needs and Shad was one with nature.

“When Archie took over the homestead, they piped water into the house from the well, but they always had an outdoor toilet. The indoor toilet was my idea.

“The house was built on rocks. There was no foundation. It was a great place for rattlesnakes. When I ran into my first rattlesnake, my first thought was, ‘Help!’ My second thought was, ‘There’s no one to help you.’ That’s what you learn up here. You have to be able to take care of yourself. You can’t call the sheriff and an ambulance certainly isn’t going to drive in. You are on your own.

“The Samuelses’ philosophy on wildlife was, ‘If it doesn’t bother me, I’m not going to bother it.’ They were here first. They had a lot of respect for the animals. They liked the animals on the land. They didn’t want to destroy anything.

Äľfâ€šÄ,© 1999, Vacaville Museum and Kristin Delaplane Conti