

Downpour made a memorable May Day

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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While the celebration of May Day goes back to pagan times, it was celebrated in Solano County well into the 20th century. Each spring, residents anticipated gathering outdoors to enjoy the fresh young greenery, renew friendships after a long winter, dance around the maypole and feast on a lavish picnic.

Local botanist Willis Linn Jepson recorded his memories of May Day celebrations throughout the years. On May 1, 1900, he wrote in his fieldbook: "Today is Mayday! Miss Florence Mayhew remarked this morning how delightful a festival it was; there were no duties to perform, no church to go to, no gifts to make - a festival of pure pleasure.

"And it is celebrated among the trees - at least always in California. The groves of native trees - particularly of valley oaks - in little vales, are preferred. There, beforehand, a dancing platform is erected and for the afternoon games are arranged."

On another occasion, Jepson fondly remembered his childhood impression of May Day: "It might have been May 1 of 1875 that the May Day was held in the English Hills. I was pretty small, not over 7 or 8 years old. ... I remember well the procession of spring wagons and carriages ... on the straight level of road in front of W.W. Smith's. ...

"A party of people on this lane tried to pass us - and my father's mettle was stirred immediately. Away we went, the carriage horses flying under the whip, my mother frightened for fear we should over-turn, my sisters on the back seat screaming.

"Finally the race was over, we prevented them from passing us and again trotted leisurely in the now thick procession of wagons to an oak-dotted glade somewhere behind Dunns Peak.

"What a festive scene. Everyone scattered over the clean glade, little groups here and there making ready to enjoy the day, the fresh colors of the girls (sic) dresses, the boys in their best clothes, not to speak of the bunting on the candy and lemonade stands. Everyone was talking and visiting and renewing old acquaintances. Promptly at twelve o'clock everyone prepared for lunch - the white cloths spread on the grass and heaped high with the best things to eat - roast chicken, fried chicken, pies and cakes of all kind and crackly biscuits, doughnuts and short bread."

A particularly memorable May Day celebration occurred in 1883. A large crowd, estimated by some to reach 2,000, gathered from as far as Vacaville, Winters, Madison, Dixon, Davisville, Allendale, Pleasant Valley and Vaca Valley at Oiler's Grove to enjoy the festival.

As the Vacaville Reporter told on May 5: "(They came) on foot, on the cars, on horseback, on muleback, in gigs, in single buggies, in two-horse carriages, in lumber wagons, in fruit wagons - any way to get there, they came. The old gentleman came with the old lady, the young gentleman with his sweetheart, the domestic husband and wife with the household staff, consisting in many instances of a full dozen children.

"May Day is more generally observed in California than any other holiday, in fact it is the regular Fourth of July of the year, when people meet on terms of equality, renew old friendships and make new ones."

The entertainment program consisted of music by the Elmira Band, including a quartet "Brave Temperance Boys" and a duet and chorus, "Don't Vote for a Man if He Drinks," plus speeches and prayers.

With these improving songs in mind, the Vacaville Reporter editor added tongue-in-cheek this description: "It is impossible for a man measuring six feet around the girth to get behind a gum tree 6 inches through without being seen - especially when he has a bottle to his lips telescoped. Either the tree should be larger or the man smaller."

Both the Elmira String Band and the Elmira Brass Band provided music for the dance and, as the editor noted: "The boys furnished far better music than we anticipated listening to, in fact, we believe they surprised themselves."

Around noon, the day's beautiful weather changed to a heavy downpour. "A panic seized every one, the desire to keep dry being the uppermost thought," continued the editor. "The gentleman gallantly offered the ladies every protection that lay in their power, and during the whole of the trying ordeal we heard not a single mutter, every one enjoying to the uttermost the cold water picnic internally and externally.

"As soon as the shower commenced, Mr. Oiler kindly threw his residence open to all, and very soon the house was filled to its utmost capacity, from kitchen to parlor, from cellar to garret. It is needless to say that after the departure of the throng, the floor, carpets, etc., etc., presented an exceedingly muddy appearance.

"... If Mr. Oiler missed any great deal of surface soil from his grove, we will just say now to him confidentially that we'd seen Dr. Dobbins, George Brougham, G. W. Thissell,

James A. Bradley, John Huckins and several hundred others with the soles of their feet all full trying to walk off with it. Yes, and Chas. Loomis' big foot prints there too."

Not only was this a kind act by the Oiler family, they, surprisingly enough, also offered their property up for the next May Day. And while that one proved to be drier, its celebrations provided the same merriment that had everyone remembering the May Day of 1875.

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