

Many women helped build Solano County's character

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, August 15, 1999

There is some record of the local Patwin Indian women. Their small communities included the Suisunee and Ulatus.

The women were the primary gatherers. With cone-shaped baskets on their backs, they foraged for nature's foods, such as seeds, nuts and berries. At home, they pounded the acorns into flour and prepared foods for immediate use and winter storage. The women were basket weavers and their handiwork was useful when trading with other tribes.

In the late 1830s, Hispanic families started arriving.

In 1841, Isabella Pena traveled with her husband and six children to Lagoon Valley. The family's adobe was simple: dirt floors, three rooms and four windows.

In the earliest days, Isabella cooked the food outside under a lean-to. In 1888, a proper kitchen was built. Because there was no town established, food staples were purchased on period trips to the mission in Sonoma.

Fiestas were an occasion. The women at one such fiesta were described by Luzena Wilson: "The young ladies were dressed in true Mexican costume; snowy chemises of soft fine linen, cut low, displayed the plump necks, leaving bare the dimpled arms; bright hued silk petticoats in great plaid patterns and shawls and of brilliant scarlet, set off in contrast their glossy, jet hair, their red lips, and their sparkling, tigerish, changing eyes."

Mason and Luzena Wilson arrived in 1852, set their covered wagon in an oat field. Luzena set up a prairie hotel. Food was cooked on an outdoor fire and the bedding was a haystack.

By 1853, the couple were settled in a proper house and Luzena invited five guests, close to the sum total of inhabitants in the area, for Christmas where she served onion soup, roast elk and lamb, radishes, lettuce, parsley, dried apple pie and rice pudding.

The majority of women who settled in the area worked long hours in providing a home

and working on the farm. The basic chores of cleaning, washing, ironing and cooking were laborious.

Clothes ironed on hot days was a particularly disagreeable job as it required a constant fire in the stove for heating up the irons.

Cooking was another hot job in the summer with the stove fire adding more heat to the already overheated rooms. It was during these months that the fruits and vegetables were harvested and this meant canning - more long hours over a hot stove.

A few women turned entrepreneurs. Two were raising turkeys. Nancy Geary, who was born into slavery in Mississippi, came out with her children to Dixon in 1868 with the Duke family. She worked as a midwife and nurse and then she also had an ice cream store.

Another Dixon woman, Isabell Olivas, sold tamales. Others ran ranches, such as Elise Buckingham, a wealthy divorcee, Sarah A. Bates, who received her education in New York City, and Harriet Barrows. Harriet hired out as a housekeeper and cook in order to purchase her farming tools.

As the towns grew, it was largely the women who were responsible for the cultural aspects of the communities. They organized clubs and were responsible for the many charity benefits.

In 1853, Mary Atkins helped establish the Benicia Young Ladies Seminary. In Vacaville in 1911, Kate Steiger founded the Saturday Club. Vacaville's Leila McKevitt was well known for her 30 years with the American Red Cross.

Most farm children learned to ride horses, as did Helen Davis of Vacaville, who grew up to become a renowned horse trainer. In 1926, it was reported that she was one of the few women in the world to train as well as drive a racer.

Mary Rose Marcell was known as Mother Travis. In 1942, construction of Travis Air Base commenced and Mary's farm was near by. Mary often supplied the base families with eggs and fresh vegetables. Later she helped with baby-sitting and worked at the Child Care Center. Her name will forever be linked to Solano County's history, as will the many other ladies of Solano's past.

* * *

Pick up the new self-guided walking tour brochure at the Vacaville Museum, 213 Buck Ave, from 1 to 4:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. The tour includes the historic homes on Buck Avenue. The land was once owned by Luzena Stanley Wilson and then

Historical Articles of Solano County

Many women helped build Solano County's character - Sunday, August 15, 1999

purchased by the Buck family. Call 447-4513 or check out the web site at www.vacavillemuseum.org.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/704>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/704/>