A Look Back in Time

By Kristin Delaplane

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In 1859, John Sweeney was killed at a corral in the Montezuma Township. Philander Arnold pled self-defense to the deed, but when it was pointed out Philander’s son had provided his father with the double-barreled shotgun, the case went against him, and Philander was found guilty of manslaughter.

Philander had come to California from Stark County, Ill., in 1853. He had traveled with his six children and an ailing wife, whose name was Phoebe.

Less than a month after their arrival in California, Phoebe died. It was then that Philander and the children moved to the Montezuma Hills in Solano County and embarked in the sheep-raising business.

A year later, in 1854, Philander married a widow, Jane Macy. For a time the family lived in Fairfield so the children could attend school there. When Philander’s daughter, Phoebe, turned 15 in 1867, Philander sent her to Mills College, which was then located in Benicia.

In 1869, Philander moved from Solano County to San Diego, where his son lived. Philander was then 60 years old. He joined his son, Cyrus, in what became the Arnold Realty Co. The business lasted into the 1960s.

The family kept their Solano holdings until 1876, but Philander donated a corner of the ranch for a school, a cemetery and a church.

Philander passed away in 1888. He was 79 years old.

The Hughes family

George W. Hughes was a rancher in the Suisun Valley. As a tenant rancher, he ran some of the major ranches in the area, including those owned by the Hatch, Pierce, Robbins and Nancy Berry families.

George was born and raised in Mendocino County. His father was a sailor, and he worked on boats along the Mendocino coast. George father’s suffered ill health early on, and he ended up in a soldier’s home in Sotell.
That left only George’s mother to raise their four children. She worked as a cook in the lumber camps cooking for crew members. When the schooners that carried lumber to San Francisco were anchored out, a small boat would take her out to cook for the crews on board the ship.

Another way of making money was to work in the fruit industry, which was predominant in California at that time. Periodically, during the 1890s, the family would come over to Solano County to find work during the fruit season. Traveling by wagon, George’s mother would bring the children. Because George’s mother was one of the fastest fruit cutters, she was able to make good money cutting fruit, which was paid for by the piece. The smaller children cut fruit with their mother. As they grew older, George and his brother, Dave, found work picking fruit and working with the horses.

By the age of 15 or 16, George was working full-time on the Hatch Ranch in Suisun Valley, and the family had moved to Fairfield. George was on the Hatch Ranch in 1906 when the San Francisco earthquake hit. He recalled that he was trying to water horses, but they wouldn’t go near the horse trough when the water splashing about.

It was about this time George met his soon-to-be wife. She worked for a department store in Oakland, when her girlfriend convinced her to pick fruit as an adventure. She met George, and soon the two married. George continued to work at farming on the Hatch Ranch and for the Robbins family.

The couple had three boys and one girl. Bert Hughes, the youngest, was born in Suisun Valley on the Votypka Ranch.

When Bert was a young boy, his father, George, quit farming and started driving a truck. Shortly after, George and Bert’s mother divorced, and Bert moved to Oakland with his mother and sister. His brother, Warren, continued to live with his father and attended Armijo High School. Later, Warren become a fire chief in Vacaville.

Bert returned to Solano County in 1951. He purchased a shoe shop on Main Street in Vacaville and was in that business until 1953, when he went to work for the school district. Today, Bert is a noted local historian with the Vacaville Heritage Council and volunteers at the Solano County Archives.