

Many Causes for Rape of the Vacaville Scene

By John Rico

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THE CHANGING FACE OF RURAL VACAVILLE - In the annual Solano County crop report compiled by Agricultural Commissioner Richard Lawley and his staff for 1980, are some interesting figures reflecting on the diversity of products now grown on Solano County lands. Also of interest to the report is a statement which estimates that in the past years the county has lost 3,650 acres to urbanization, out of which 970 acres were prime land and 2,680 were used for grazing purposes.

Despite the loss of this acreage, the report shows gross values of county crops are continually increasing every year, hitting a record \$152,995,500 for 1980, reflecting an increase of \$18,803,400 above the previous year's figure.

When the State Legislature, back in 1850 passed an act establishing Solano County, the total acres represented were 529,280. Out of that total 48,600 acres were under water.

Lawley's 1980 report shows pasture lands in the county cover 172,200 acres; field crops are grown on 151,461; fruits and nuts are on 13,609; truck crops grow on 19,419 acres and seed crops were on 9,428.

With cities in the county continually expanding their boundaries, it's a "rob Peter to pay Paul" situation as far as land areas are concerned. A late estimate on the land areas within the cities at present is around 37,000 acres.

Although there is the continuing change of boundaries which chisels away at available farm lands, Lawley's figures are interesting in the point where they show gross farm values in the county in the past 10 years have nearly tripled, from a 1971 figure of approximately \$52 million to the 1980 total of over \$152 millions. The annual totals represent gross income, so it is necessary to take under consideration the skyrocketing inflation spiral which is being experienced in the farming community.

It may be worth repeating the story told by Ed Uhl of Vacaville, who was one of the proponents of the Monticello Dam project. In his many trips to Washington, D.C., in an endeavor to secure favorable appropriations from Congressional Committees so that the dam could be started, Uhl more than once told his listeners that with Monticello water, farm crop values in the county would increase ten-fold. The dam was built and his predictions came true.

While Lawley's report shows several thousand acres lost in the last two years to urbanization, there was a period in Vacaville's past when a total of more than 20,000 acres of fruit lands were abandoned because of economic conditions and diminishing production. Most of these lands today continue the rural atmosphere, but homes are springing up throughout the area on acreage as specified by orders of the Board of Supervisors.

The late C. M. Hartley, pioneer fruit grower here, at one time had 1,000 acres in one parcel, all planted to fruit trees. He also had other fruit lands in the local area. Then there was the Buck family, with vast orchard holdings, not only in Vacaville, but in several other counties; and the Uhl family owning lands on which much of the north part of Vacaville now rests.

It can be said that the fruit growers in Vacaville earned very little for their efforts. In our past, fruit growing was a gamble unequalled by any games of chance at the gambling casinos of Tahoe or Reno. Many a grower, snug in the anticipation of looking forward to a good harvest, suffered through frosts, winds, pests, and prices dictated by commission houses and conglomerates.

Would you believe that dried apricots at one time were sold by growers to packing firms for two cents a pound. In 1980 dried apricots sold at approximately \$1.75. per pound.

The names of Vaca and Pena are prominent in our early historical data, but seldom is the name of John R. Wolfskill ever mentioned. He was the "father" of the fruit industry in California, starting back in 1842.

Wolfskill, a native of Kentucky, secured the Rio Los Putos grant in upper Pleasants Valley, along the banks of Putah Creek.

Wolfskill had first settled in the Los Angeles area, but an urge drove him north to Yount's in Napa County. Gathering before him 90 head of cattle he crossed over the mountains toward Suisun and then turned north, bypassing the Vacaville area and settling on his grant along Putah Creek.

History tells of his loneliness those first few years, when he had to confront grizzly bear, at one time shooting five of the animals on a trip to Sutter's Fort in Sacramento.

Wolfskill had intended to follow livestock husbandry, because of the abundance of fresh water and green grasses. But it was not long before he had planted a vineyard, then apricot and peach pits, which sprouted into trees.

Upon investigation, Wolfskill discovered a source of wagons in the east, and in 1854 he

placed an order for two Concord wagons, to be shipped to him around the Horn. The wagons cost \$1,300 but Wolfskill was provided a method of transporting his fresh fruit. A crop of apricots, grown on six trees, and weighing about 2,000 pounds, sold in Sacramento for 75 cents per pound.

As newcomers followed Wolfskill into the local area, they too were fascinated by the fruit growing industry. Soon the valleys and the hills, and in some places, the mountainsides, were symmetrically planted to vineyards and trees. From those few apricot and peach pits planted by Wolfskill blossomed forth an industry here which became the envy of millions of people across the United States. Easterners could not believe that fresh fruits could be made to ripen as early as April.

John Patton Lyon experimented with shipment of the first full carload of fruit to an eastern city. In 1876 a carload, which bounced its way across country for three weeks, landed at the Centennial Exposition in Chicago.

To the Buck family goes credit for having shipped the first full carload of fresh fruit in 1887. It's destination was New York, and the first local experience of selling fruit "at auction" was inaugurated.

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