Vacaville’s Past Rests Upon A Peaceful Hill

By John Rico

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AT REST - PEACEFULLY UPON A HILL - While I do not cherish the assignment of reporting the obituaries in this newspaper, I do so having been a resident here for more than 60 years, and having known thousands of neighbors, friends and relatives who have gone to their last rewards.

A few days ago I toured the Vacaville-Elmira Cemetery with Superintendent Harold “Bud” Bell, and I can say it was an interesting and informative leisurely walk all the while reminiscing as I noted the inscriptions on the headstones.

There they rest by the thousands (no one knows the actual count) men, women and children of all races, creeds. In life there could have been differences of opinions, but at rest as neighbors all is forgotten.

With a brisk wind playing its familiar tune among the eucalyptus trees, I tried to remember how some of those people cherished their beliefs in real life. Here was a man who took his politics seriously; here was another frugal with his meager savings; here was a non-believer; close by was a devout Christian. But, there they were resting peacefully, far away from these beliefs, or whatever problems they may have had to suffer throughout life.

It was interesting to read the inscription on the headstone of Hannah Williams, born in 1781, and buried in the Vacaville cemetery in 1853. Then there was C. W. Hall, born in 1825 and buried under those eucalyptus trees in 1858.

There was one marker with the inscription: Mrs. Peter Kennedy, a native of Scotland, age 100 years, died August 12, 1896. There’s another stone marking the grave of Mary Jane Huggard, 108, who died here in 1945.

A simple marker designates “At Rest, Indians, Hawkins Ranch 1852.”

Nearby are the headstones of the Hawkins family, including one for Arculus G. Hawkins, 1808-1895. It was Arculus Hawkins, a Bible-reading, cattle-raising rancher, who donated a small portion of the present cemetery for public use. He crossed the plains in 1852 with his wife and children, and after an active life passed on at age 87.

Another marker designates the grave of Henry Eversole, 1834-1912. As a young man,
Eversole was a Vacaville area carpenter, and with his knowledge of hammer and saw, also became a casket maker, and eventually an undertaker.

“Bud” Bell will readily admit that there are many burials in the cemetery where all identification has been lost, mainly through fire burning over the graves and consuming the wood markers. In other places the stones have disappeared beneath the surface of the earth.

In the early history of Vacaville a small cemetery was maintained along the banks of Ulatis Creek in the vicinity of the present Andrews Park. A few years back, when Interstate 80 was being realigned in Lagoon Valley, another cemetery was discovered. The remains were relocated on the crest of a hill above the Pena Adobe.

Although Emanuel Vaca is honored by the name Vacaville, nowhere in the cemetery are the remains of this pioneer or his immediate family. There is the grave of his granddaughter, Marie Dolores Vaca Lyon, who died here in 1948 at age 99.

It has been near impossible to compile a precise list of all the burials in the “old section” of the local cemetery, but from one which was assembled, it is interesting to note that there are only two burials dating back to the decade between 1950-1860; there are 27 between 1860 and 1870, and 51 between 1870 and 1880. All of these burials were made there over 100 years ago.

The man who built one of Vacaville’s oldest homes, Dr. W. J. Dobbins, was laid to rest here in 1905. His home, now the property of E.H. Uhl, is just north of Albertson’s store on Dobbins Street.

In the 1892 earthquake, which did considerable damage to buildings in Vacaville, the Dobbins “mansion” suffered major damage, and although the entire family was asleep when the 3 a.m. shock occurred, falling timbers and other materials covered the beds, but there were no serious injuries to the family.

The man who served Vacaville for nearly 30 years as mayor and councilman, C.J. Uhl, is at rest as of 1965.

Unfortunately, for many decades, Vacaville’s cemetery was bleak, unattended, and to the point where it was a disgrace. In June 1926, petitions asking for formation of a cemetery district were presented to the Solano County Board of Supervisors, and immediate action was taken so that funds would be available to inaugurate an improvement program. Today, the district is controlled by three trustees who are appointed by the district supervisor.
For nearly 10 years, between 1920 and 1930, many local area residents who had gone to their final rest, were taken to the Dixon Cemetery. Some of this action was taken because of the condition of the local cemetery, and there was a period between 1925 and 1930 when Vacaville was without a Catholic Church, the one on Wilson Street having burned to the ground in 1925.

Times have changed from those days when livery stable operator Jack Duncan would drive his team pulling a glass-enclosed hearse down Main Street, but the wind continues to blow among those eucalyptus trees - and it will continue to blow, and a hundred years from now, or perhaps a thousand, there will be the inscriptions of those headstones.