Houses Are Fast Covering Those Green Hills

By John Rico

Friday, February 23, 1979

“Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes at the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on” his back the burden of the world.”

Those four lines are from Edwin Markham’s famous poem, “The Man with the Hoe.” History records Markham having been inspired to write the poem after having seen Millet’s world-famous painting of a brutalized toiler in the deep abyss of labor.

But it must also be remembered young Markham spent his boyhood days on his mother’s cattle ranch in Lagoon Valley, south of Vacaville, and he had’ every opportunity to see men and women of all nationalities toiling in the fields with their back-breaking hoes.

Residents of Vacaville today, especially those in the rural contiguous areas north, comfortable in their homes among the rolling hills, are treading the lands where once sweat flowed freely from human brows as the lands were cleared and cultivated.

While it is generally accepted that the area at one time was prominent throughout the nation as an early fruit producing section, very little is known or written of the hardships endured by early settlers in planting their lands to vegetable crops, long before orchards or vineyards came into bearing.

The late E.H. (Ed) McMillan, a pioneer automobile dealer in Vacaville, knew most of the residents of those hills; partook of their hospitality and cherished the memories he had gained by his association with these people.

In a lengthy review he wrote back in 1966 for this newspaper, which was never published in its entirety because some of his revelations were too personal, here is what he briefly said about the early vegetable growing period of the English Hills:

“Some ranchers planted many varieties of vegetables using what was called a ‘stoop hoe’ with a wide blade and a short handle.

“Each spring they hauled their vegetables to Vallejo by team and then on the Monticello steamship, arriving in SF that night and were distributed to the commission

houses the next morning.

“It took a day to go forth and a day to return. “Afterwards they shipped by way of the Suisun wharf by sailboat.

“Later they shipped by freight cars loaded near the old SP depot.

“After many years the San Leandro flats put in hundreds of acres of vegetables which in time ruined the English Hills vegetable growing business.

The virgin, shallow soil of the rolling hills, bathed in long months of continuous sunshine, nourished by an abundance of rain, was able to present a panoramic view of greenery the likes of which were to be found in but few places around the world.

Tomatoes went to market from those rolling hills in early May; followed by string beans, corn, squash, green peas and watermelons, the latter being highly profitable because of the early dates of maturity.

Those early vegetables and fruits were in demand in San Francisco. A young man by the name of A.P. Giannini made frequent trips to those hills soliciting produce for his father-in-law’s commission house. This was the same A.P. who was to start a bank in 1904, which today is known to people around the world as the Bank of America.

Although many farmers knew they were raping the soil with year-in and year-out cultivation, they had reached the point of no return where the cost of fertilizer was more than the lands would bring back in gross dollars.

This fact, plus a word called “progress” brought upon the demise of the man with the hoe, and the man with his team of horses and a plow. The crawler-type tractor appeared on the scene.

Success in plowing those fields was not to be denied to the individual possessing guts, stamina and foresight. One such person was Antonio Maria Esquival, a native of New Mexico, who came to the area in 1854, saw the potential, and although a common laborer, out of his small earnings he was able to amass lands north of Vacaville totaling 2490 acres. It was in later years, the period after 1880, that many people came to the area, and were able to purchase portions of the huge Esquival holdings.

But, as McMillan quotes in his article: “There was always laughter and the unending pleasure of attending a wedding, a baptism, a hog butchering, at one of the many homes scattered throughout those hills.”

Country living has taken over. Elaborate homes are fast cluttering the landscape, offering solitude to hundreds of families who cherish that life-style.

In less than 100 years those hills have seen the transition from wilderness to vegetable gardens; to orchards and vineyards; then back to open, arid grazing lands.

Who dares to predict just what the next 100 years will do to those rolling hills? There's every promise that today's houses will be engulfed in a holocaust of building activity. Perhaps in some of the excavating there could be uncovered the metal parts of an old wine press or grape crusher, or the steel rims from decaying 50-gallon wine barrels, all a prominent part of an era filled with good times, laughter, family reunions, all coming to an end when Mother Earth hollered "quits" and stopped furnishing those golden yellow apricots, black-seeded watermelons, and luscious Tokay grapes.

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