Once-Primitive Vacaville Has Changed

By John Rico

Friday, January 26, 1979

NOT TOO LONG AGO - JUST 100 YEARS - Back in 1879, Wood, Alley & Co. of Oakland published what is perhaps the most comprehensive history of Solano County ever assembled up to that era. Historian J. P. Monro Fraser, who researched the material for the 503-page volume, went into minute detail about some of the happenings, events and biographies of the period prior to 1879.

Historian Fraser bandied the English language in a fashion not printed in many books. In the preface to the History of Solano County, the author and publishers had this to say in part:

“Our task has been no easy one. What is there more depressing than to be told in one’s researches; Oh, there is nothing to write about here.” ...

Back 100 years from today, Fraser in his writings, delved into the earlier days of Solano County, painting a written picture which would today attract the admiration of many a reader.

Here is the way Fraser saw, or was told, the landscape of Solano County was like in its virgin atmosphere:

“The county, be it in what valley soever we wot, was one interminable grain field; mile upon mile, acre after acre, the wild oats grew in marvelous profusion in many places to a prodigious height - one great glorious green of wild waving corn - high over head of the wayfarer on foot and shoulder high with the equestrian. Wild flowers of every prismatic shade charmed the eye, while they vied with each other in the gorgeousness of their colors and blended into dazzling splendor. One breath of wind and the wide emerald expanse rippled itself into space, while with a heavier breeze came a swell whose waves beat against the mountain sides, and, being hurled back were lost in the far- away horizon. Shadow pursued shadow in a long merry chase. The air was filled with the hum of bees, the chirruping of birds, an overpowering fragrance from the various plants, causing the smallest sounds, in the extreme solitude, to become like the roar of the ocean.

“The hill-sides, overrun as they were with a dense mass of almost impenetrable chapparal, were hard to penetrate; trees of a larger growth struggled for existence in isolated sterile spots. On the plains but few oaks of any size were to be seen, a reason
for this being found in the devastating influence of the prairie fires, which were of frequent occurrence, thus destroying the young shoots as they sprouted from the earth; while the flames, with their forked tongues, scorched the older ones, utterly destroying them, leaving those only to survive the rude attack which were well advanced in years.

“This almost boundless range was intersected throughout with trails whereby the traveler moved from point to point, progress being, as it were, in darkness on account of the height of the oats on either side, and rendered dangerous in the lower valleys by the bands of wild cattle, sprung from the stock introduced by the first settlers. They found food and shelter on the plains during the night; at dawn of day they repaired to the higher grounds to chew the cud and bask in the sunshine. At every yard, cayotes sprang from the feet of the voyager. The hissing of snakes, the frightened rush of lizards, all tended to heighten the sense of danger; while the flight of quail, the nimble run of the rabbit, and the stampede of antelope and elk, which abounded in thousands, added to the charm, making him, be he whosoever he may, pedestrian or equestrian, feel the utter insignificance of man, the “noblest work of God.”

“At this time, as now, the rivers, creeks and sloughs swarmed with fish of various kinds that had not, as yet been rudely frightened by the whirl of civilization. Then, the shriek of the owl, the howl of the panther, or the gruff growl of the grizzly bear was heard. Now, the scene is changed; it has ceased to be the lair of the wild beast, but civilization has introduced the innocent prattle of children, and the merry tones of womanhood, causing one to stay and ponder which be best, the former solitude, or the pleasing pleasant sunshine of sparkling voices and sparkling water.”

It is interesting when considering that the quotes above were written exactly 100 years ago - words which are a stereotyped copy of what people today are concerned about.

Officially, there was a Solano County, by an Act of the Legislature back in February 1850, but there was no official designation for the town of Vacaville until July 1892.

Back in 1879, the face of the local landscape was changing, not at today’s pace, but residents then were noticing the gradual influx of newcomers, a handful here and a handful there.

Very few people residing in these valleys 160 years ago would dare to envision the transition from “waving grain and corn” to a panorama of blossoming fruit trees and dark green vineyards. But progress brought about the changes which lasted for almost another 100 years from that date back in 1879.

We often wonder how many people living here in 1879, taking the time to climb to the higher peaks of the Blue Mountains, looked down upon the valleys below and remark:
“Some day there will be houses over there, and beyond you will see miles and miles of sugar beets, tomatoes, corn and alfalfa covering the landscape.”

Unquestionably, 100 years from 1979, someone will write telling about the Vacaville of that era. They will probably do those writings among the sounds of a huge metropolis, industrial noises, and the nerve-wracking hustle and bustle of activity.

It is difficult to-envision another hundred years in the future which would equal the century between 1879 and 1979, but there is every reason to believe it is in the offing.