

Early Fiesta a memorable celebration

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Fiesta Day celebrations have a long tradition in Vacaville's history.

They go back to the marriage of Maria Dolores Lyon, granddaughter of both Juan Manuel Vaca and Juan Felipe Pena. For this event, guests arrived from all over California, some traveling on horseback all the way from Los Angeles. The wedding festivities at the Pena Adobe lasted an entire week.

During her first year in the Vaca Valley area, around 1850, Luzena Stanley Wilson was invited to one of the frequent fiestas given by the Pena and Vaca families, an event she later described vividly in her memoirs.

"We had been in the valley only about two months, when Senor Vaca came riding over one morning to ask me, by the aid of an interpreter, to attend a ball to be given that night at his house. I was quite unfamiliar with the manner and the customs of the Spanish people, and my acceptance of the cordial and pressing invitation was prompted quite as much by curiosity as by my friendly feelings for my neighbors."

The Vaca and Pena fiestas were famous, attracting guests from far away. Traveling a day or two to attend a fiesta was common, as this provided one of the few opportunities to socialize in still sparsely populated Northern California.

"When we arrived at the adobe house, the light streamed through open windows and doors far out into the night and revealed, tethered all about, the saddle-horses of the guests and lit up many black-eyed, smiling faces, looking to see how the Americans would be received ...

"Among the prominent and honored guests were members of the most wealthy and influential Spanish families of the country. I remember well the pretty faces and manly figures of the Armijos, Picos, Penas and Berryessas ..."

Lifestyle and customs of the early Anglo-American settlers differed greatly from those of the established Spanish settlers. After years of living in a wagon, tent or under the open sky, Senor Vaca's house, probably similar in style to the Pena Adobe, must have seemed quite comfortable to Luzena Stanley Wilson.

"Don Manuel with his daughter, greeted us with all the ceremony and courtesy of a

Spanish grandee and showed us to the place of honor. We were ushered into a long room illuminated with tallow dips, destitute of furniture, with the exception of the two or three chairs reserved exclusively for the use of the American visitors. On either side were many mats, on which reclined with careless grace and ease the flirting belle and beau and the wrinkled duennas of the fiesta.

"The musical accompaniment to the dancing, which had already begun, was played upon guitar and tambourine, and the laughing, chattering, happy crowd swayed and turned in wave-like undulation to the rhythm of a seductive waltz. They fluttered their silken vari-colored scarfs, and bent their lithe bodies in graceful dances which charmed my cotillion and quadrille-accustomed eyes."

Being an independent (and enterprising) person herself, customs such as the strict chaperonage of the duennas may have seemed confining to Luzena's eyes. A proper early Victorian lady herself, she was used to the dress code of the simple styles worn by the pioneer women, with tight-laced corsets and muted colors, where the fabric covered most of the wearer.

Mexican costume must have appeared quite colorful and unrestrained to her eye. Her words reveal her fascination with the exotic ballroom scene. Her choice of words in describing all the female charms, such as dimpled arms, reveals her Victorian sense of beauty.

"The young ladies were dressed in true Mexican costume; snowy chemises of soft, fine linen, cut low, displayed the plump necks, leaving bare the dimpled arms; bright hued silk petticoats in great plaid patterns and shawls and scarfs of brilliant scarlet, set off in contrast their glossy, jet hair, their red lips, and their sparkling, tigerish, changing eyes.

The men in holiday attire of velvet jackets of royal purple and emerald green, profusely trimmed with gold and silver braids, were as gaudy in color and picturesque in appearance as the feminine portion of the assembly."

Just as the dress code was unfamiliar to Luzena Stanley Wilson, so was the food served at these fiestas. Again, her fascination can be clearly heard.

"The refreshments comprised strangely compounded but savory Spanish stews, hot with chilies, great piles of tortillas, and gallons of only tolerable whiskey."

Near midnight they were served informally. "Some of the guests ate reclining on mats, some standing about the long, low table, some lounging in doorways and window-seats - all laughing, talking, coquetting and thoroughly enjoying the passing minutes, forgetful of yesterday, heedless of tomorrow, living only in the happy present."

Modern Fiesta Days began in September 1950 with the celebration of the city's centennial. The three-day festivities included a "historical pageant" with more than 200 participants re-enacting "main eras of what is known of Vaca Valley, from the wilderness, to the Indian and Spanish, to the cowboys, to the new eras."

Spanish entertainers, the queen's contest and a "mammoth parade" have been part of Fiesta Days since. While the name (and the parade route) changed several times over the years, today's Fiesta Days still bring Vacaville residents together in celebration.

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