

“Little Norway” History Told

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Our interesting county has had many pioneer settlements which, in the main, have disappeared with the march of time. Some, like Tremont, Batavia, Maine Prairie, Silveyville are memories. Others, like Collinsville, Denverton, Elmira, Birds Landing—and even Cordelia, are only a shadow of their former size and influence.

We will tell today of “Little Norway,” located in the region once designated for the town of Montezuma. Up-county residents still refer to the area between Denverton and Collinsville as Little Norway, but the elevations called Montezuma Hills are the only reminders of the mythical city.

Wood Young, Fairfield businessman and official historian for the Solano County Historical Society, wrote an article on Little Norway some two years ago which was published. Young is the research scholar who recently did such an excellent job on the history of the Pena Adobe, now being restored near Vacaville—the oldest structure in our Solano County.

Three Norwegian seafaring men, Carl H. Thompson and his brother Dan, and their friend Steve Larsen, skipped their ship in 1852 in San Francisco, purchased a sloop, and set sail for the gold diggings. Without charts, they managed to miss the main Sacramento River channel and found themselves in Montezuma Slough—familiar to so many Vallejo duck-hunters. They abandoned the sloop and walked inland; they found no trace of minerals, but were impressed with the lush growth of wild oats, and the herds of Tule Elk (Wapiti) and antelope. (Early historians tell us of the Wapiti elk on Mare Island in the 18th century.)

These Norwegians made a note of what they saw in Solano County but made their way, walking, to Chinese Camp in Calaveras County. Two years of hardship, with very little gold, sufficed. They purchased two oxen and trudged back to Montezuma Hills in 1854, built a small house, and began raising Spanish Merino sheep and long horned cattle.

SQUATTERS

These Norwegian bachelors were obviously squatters, at least in the eyes of one L. W. Hastings, a Mormon agent and attorney who presumably acquired the area in 1846, and did indeed build an adobe house which was to be the beginning of the City of Montezuma.

Gradually other Scandinavians took up farming in the area, and "Little Norway" became the accepted name of the area east and south of Denverton. Some of those joining the first settlers were Sven Olsen, Nels Skon, Julius and Otto Olsen, Olaf Thompson, Ole Thompson, Ed Arneberg, and several of the Chris Lambrecht family.

Descendants of some of these pioneers are well known throughout the county. Many Vallejoans, likewise, will have fond memories of Captain "Ole" Olsen of the California Highway Patrol who served this area for so long and so efficiently. His forebears were part of the Little Norway settlement.

Since Hastings himself had no proven title to the land on which he had built his adobe shelter, he did demand rent for the house; the Norwegians made peace with him by giving him two mules and six long-horned cattle. This adobe dwelling, remodeled, is owned and occupied today by S. Earl Stratton. But title to property in Little Norway became more and more confused because of the manner of acquisition, and the haphazard although sincere manner of subsequent transfers. It was not until 1920 that Attorney Joseph Raines (later Solano's revered Superior Judge) who now resides at 723 Capitol Street, filed a Quit Title action to definitely clear the involved real estate titles of the present occupants of the lands settled by their forefathers some 60 years earlier.

CHANGES IN FAMILY NAMES

There is a similarity in Scandinavian names like the common American surnames of Smith, Jones and Brown. This prompted several of the early settlers to change their names. Carl Thompson changed his to Tonnesen. Arneberg changed his to Olsen. The son of Carl Tonnesen, Charles H. Tonnesen, died Feb. 28, 1961 at the age of 91. The 1875 home of this pioneer is still occupied by descendants.

We have referred to the unstable title situation in the early days. It was more than that; it actually brought bloodshed. From some handwritten documents in the Solano County Clerk's office, our historian Wood Young found many bitter disagreements. On Nov. 13, 1861, while Ole Thompson was herding sheep on lands professed to be occupied by a Mr. Ambrose, he became involved in an argument with Joseph Zaesch, a sheepherder for Ambrose. Ole was fatally stabbed by Joseph. Ole L. Thompson died the next day and his assailant was tried and sentenced to four years in the state prison.

We have written much in previous columns about the historical places in Solano County. We believe there is an equal treasure-trove of reader interest in the story of many early Solano and Vallejo pioneers. Naturally, the first to come to mind is the owner of the Suscol Rancho and the founder of our city—General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, and his large family. On July 7th next, this community will hold a celebration to

observe the 156th anniversary of the general's birth. The Navy joins in this tribute by laying the keel, on Mare Island, of its latest Polaris submarine. We are indebted to James H. Barkely of Benicia, and Miss Maidie Brown of Sonoma, two eminently qualified biographers of the Vallejo family, for a great deal of pertinent information, to appear soon.

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