

SOLANO COUNTY PIONEERS

The following is an address to Solano County N.S.G.W. given on 10 Jan 1891. The article itself was published in the Winters Express, Yolo County, California on Saturday, January 24, 1891 on the front page. Cassie Hill provided this article for your enjoyment.

You could and should ask why an article on the pioneers of Solano County, California appears on the Cooper County, Missouri web site. The reason is simple; the pioneers of Solano and Yolo Counties, California are also the pioneers of Cooper and Howard Counties, Missouri. The surnames of Cooper, Cole, Wolfskill, Mahan, and Callaway are well-known. So while you are reading, count how many names you recognize.

SOLANO COUNTY PIONEERS A Toast on the Early Days of Solano County

The following bit of early history given by George A. Gillespie of Suisun in response to the toast, "The Pioneers of Solano." Was delivered at the banquet following the installation of the officers of Solano Parlor, N.S.G.W., on Saturday evening, January 10th. As it contains the names of many who were and are residents of Winters and vicinity, and refers to many places hereabouts, we give it place in our columns, believing it will be perused with interest by all of our readers:

MR. CHAIRMAN, FELLOW PIONEERS, AND NATIVE SONS: -

The toast announced for me to speak upon tonight is a difficult one to handle satisfactorily, both to you and myself. It is a subject upon which so much can be said, and one which may be very interesting, or, on the contrary, prove insipid and tiresome. Just where to draw the dividing line so that your patience will not be taxed and your minds edified, is the all-absorbing question with me.

It is generally well known that Manuel Baca and Juan Felipe Pena were the first Mexican settlers of the district now known as Solano county. They were brothers-in-law, and came with their families from New Mexico to this section in 1841, and located in Laguna valley and on Putah creek, building adobe houses, portions of which remain with us to this day. The following year, Jose Francisco Armijo arrived from New Mexico with his family and located in Suisun valley, building an adobe residence, the remnants of which still stand on the Pierce tract northwest of Fairfield. There were other Mexican families, of course, who located here about this time, but they were all - more or less - attaches or servants of gentlemen whom I have named. So that it may be truthfully said that they with their dependents comprised the entire Mexican family of Solano county. At the date of the arrival of the Armijo family, in 1842, John R. Wolfskill, the aged veteran, residing on Putah creek, set his foot upon our soil as the first American settler of this county. He came to California via Santa Fe, located first at Los Angeles, and in a few years, came with his flocks and herds and domiciled on Putah creek as the first American settler in this then unknown region.

In May 1847, General Vallejo deeded the site of Benica to Thomas O Larkin and Robert Semple as joint partners with himself, combining to start the first town within the borders of the county, and, during that year, quite a settlement was made within the corporate limits of that place. The immigrations of 1846 to California was far more numerous than any previous one, and, among the arrivals of interest to us, were Daniel M. Berry and family and Landy Aiford and family and Nathan Barbour. Berry, on coming into the county, settled first at Hale che muck, or old Rio Vista, but the following year he changed his location to Suisun valley (near Hatch's orchard), and was, therefore, the first settler of Suisun valley. Alford and Barbour went on to Sonoma, but, in 1847, came back to Benica, at the instance of Thomas O Larkin. Their residence in Benicia brought them in contact with Gen Persifer F. Smith, commanding the forces of the United States, located at that point, of whom they purchased a tract of land in Suisun valley, and to which they, with their families, shortly after removed, thus becoming the second American settlers of the valley.

The year, 1847, brought other pioneers to the county, in the persons of Samuel Green McMahan, who settled on Putah creek, just a mile north of Davisville, and Albert Lyon, John Patton, John P. Long, Willis Long and Henry Clay Long, who located and became the first settlers of Vaca valley. Major Stephen Cooper and Captain E.J. Von Pfister, historical pioneers, located in Benica this year; and I say historical, for Cooper was the first hotel keeper and magistrate, and Von Pfister was the first merchant of the county. And one, L.W. Hasting - said to have been a Mormon - isolated himself from the rest and built an adobe on the point above Collinsville, where remained but a few years, finally disposing of his property to John Marshall, whose relatives occupy the location to this day.

John R. Wolfskill and David D. Dutton ante-date all of the California pioneers living in Solano county. Wolfskill reached Los Angeles in 1836 and Dutton, Fort Ross, Sonoma county, in 1840. But few pioneers of the State can claim a longer residence than these two estimable citizens, who are passing into the sear and yellow leaf, and who will soon be gathered to their fathers and be buried within our borders.

I have now passed the first stage of American occupation, the period ante-dating Marshall's discovery of gold at Coloma, in 1848. Major Stephen Cooper claims to have been the first Californian to acquaint President Polk of the discovery by mailing him a letter from Benica, early in 1848, and I have no doubt but this claim is a proper one, for the old Major was politically ambitious, and belonged to one of the most distinguished and numerous families of the pioneers of Missouri, and moreover, at the time, was nigh up in the councils of the Democratic party.

The elder Coles, Coopers, Callaways and Wolfskills are, inseparably and prominently, connected with the early history and settlement of Missouri, and were all contemporaries of the famous Daniel Boone.

Every one knows of the large immigration of the fall of 1848, and of the year 1849, and of the fact that nearly all of the new comers hastened to the mines, the grand rush nearly depopulating the valleys of the sparse population that they contained. The tide, however, commenced turning in 1850, and since that time our county has been increasing in population year by year, until now the census gives us nearly 21,000.

On coming into the county, from the mines, early in 1852, I landed at Benica and on the following day I started on foot for Suisun valley. After leaving Benica, the first home stead I passed was that of Major Singleton Vanghn, who died the other day, aged ninety-two years. The next was Andrew Goodyear's and this way from him was Major E. P. Howell, the half way house to the valley. U.P. Degman was the sole occupant of Cordelia, and the first hotel keeper of the valley. William Taylor, lived at the base of the Suscol hills, above the James place. Dudley Bryant had his domicile farther north, midway between Taylor's and Major Cooper's, who then owned what is now known as the McGary place. Charles Ramsay lived on Green Valley Creek, just north of Cordelia and next above him John Stilts lived; and beyond him was Warren Perry Durbin. Coming up the Suisun valley road, the first ranch was that of Dr. James H. Boone, a historical character in the first settlement of Suisun valley, he being the individual, who incurred the ire of the Settlers' League by pointing out their houses to the United States Marshall, and for which unneighborly service they decoyed him from his house one night and gave him thirty nine lashes for his pains. Beyond Boone was the store of John E. Siever and the residences of Samuel Martin and James Dorland. Siever was the first storekeeper of the valley and James Dorland was President of the Settlers' League. Going now to the mouth of the Suisun creek, Hiram Macy located the first farm on the west. If I am not mistaken, John Smither lives where he then did. William James occupied the Thomasson place; James L. Miles then lived in that vicinity. Moore and Stevenson occupied the Hidden ranch; Nathan Barbour lived further on, and Landy Alford owned the now magnificent Pierce ranch, while the Sheldons, Chadbournes, Gardiners, Clark Hall, the Davisons, N.C. Butler, Dr. Baker, W.S. Matthews, Thomas H. Owen, Henry Russell, Captain Marr, James and John Edwards, the Mescham Bros., and a few others whose names I cannot now recall, occupied the lands eastward of the creek towards Suisun embarcadero. Northward of the Berry crossing was the pioneer ranch of D.M. Berry, the Reichert farm, now owned by W.S. McEwen, the Story farm, the Blake farm, the Ledgerwood farm, the Sweitzer place; and to the east were the Patterson ranch, the Peabody farm and the Gomer place. North of Ledgerwood's or Barton's store, was Sampson Smith's; west of him was the Brown and Ball place, the Maupin farm, and adjoining Smith was the Wetmore place now owned by Mathew and J.C. Wolfskill. Following up from here the east arm of the valley you came to the farm of Foster and Russell, now owned by J.L. Miles, and Joseph Griggs and Henderson places, the Gillispie ranch, now owned by David Clayton, the Curtis farm owned by Cal Reams, and the Gessner, Inglis and Stratton places, now the property of Wm. M. Gordon.

Going up from Maupin's which is now the Lambert farm, up the west arm of the valley, were the ranches of Frank Aldridge, Zeke Benton, Dawson Jackson and old Blacksmith George, now the James Reams place. All the land eastward of what is now known as the Harper place was an open plain, the rendezvous of wild and stray animals, and the resting and feeding place of myriads upon myriads of wild fowls, the actual number of which would baffle and astound the calculations of the most astute mathematician. The old Spanish trail from Benica and Napa joined at Cordelia, crossed at Berry's went by Barton's store through by the Armijo adobe and Sidney Clark's to Vacaville. Later on a road was opened by Alford's, coming through the valley and going over the low hills in from of the Waterman ranch and coming into the Spanish tail at Clark's place. The trail crossed Ulatis creek and then one route led up the base of the hills to Wolfskill's, while the other went by E.E. Bennett's to Silvey's, and then to the Baca settlement on Putah creek; and from there to Sutter's Fort, or Sacramento.

In the little valley, just north of Suisun, James Hills, Wm. H. Turner and Sidney Clark had their homes. Laguna valley, as I have before stated, was occupied by the Bacas and Penas. Widow Maguire, Wm. Parks, Mason Wilson, their families and dependents, comprised the inhabitants of the town of Vacaville, though its town plat was the second one recorded in the county. The Long Bros. (and they, with their cousins, were a numerous relationship) . John C. Fisk, R.U. Gray, A.C. Hawkins, W.J. Jooton, Jeff Shannon, Thomas Coffey, W.A. Dunn, Wm. G. Fore, Elias Anderson (for whom the town of Anderson is named), Dr. R.B. Ellis, Jedediah Williams, Robert Heiser, A.R. Pond, E. McGary, E.L. Bennett, Dr. H.B. Rice, Wm. Raymond, James A. Clark, R.H. Vance, Stephen and Hazen Hoyt, Sublette Bros., the Hollingsworths, W.J. Dobbins, and numerous others, whose names have passed from my memory, owned land, or had

flocks in the valley or in the immediate vicinity. J.M. Pleasants, Meredith R. Miller, L.B. Ammons, Richardson and Alex Long and John Huckins were the first settlers of Pleasant valley. Milton Wolfskill and Henry Seaman located at the mouth of Pleasant Valley Creek on Putah creek; and Seaman still owns his early possessions. Sarshal and Mathew Wolfskill located near their brother John's on Putah creek. James Sweany, Wm. Cole, O.P. Jones, James Simpson and the Gibson Bros., located on and near Sweany creek. Elijah S. Silvey located in the center of the plain, midway between Vacaville and Davisville, in 1852, giving his name to the old town and the town of Silveyville. J.B. Tufts, R.S. Phelps, Thos. M. Gregory, Fred Werner and Martin Wester were the first settlers in the vicinity of the old Solano House. Mathew Haas, S.R. Sneed, S.G. Little, J.C. Merithew, J.N. Utter, G.B. Triplett, Samuel Triplett, Gus Lutgés and widow Lewis were among the first settlers of the Maine Prairie.

N.H. Davis, A.G. Westgate and J.M. Sidwell were the first to locate in old Rio Vista. The new town is of recent origin, having been laid out since the flood of 1862.

Dr. H.H. Toland and Benj. F. Lee had a sheep ranch in the Montezuma hills in the early fifties, and J. H. Bauman, located on Bauman's ravine with sheep in the early days, while Adams, Jones, the Townsend Bros., Dr. Coskery, De Costa and others had their stock ranches between Denverton and Collinsville. Dr. Nurse, the Stewarts, the Arnolds, the Sheppards, Robert Allison and J.A.C. McCune were the first settlers in Denverton and vicinity. The Luce Bros., Job and Johnson, and Hiram Rush, were the first settlers of Potero hills.

The record I have recited related to the county prior to the year 1856, and I have made no mention of the settlement of the towns of Suisun, Fairfield, Dixon and New Rio Vista, nor have I mentioned Vallejo for the reason that, at that early day, I knew but little about that locality, scarcely knowing any one who resided there.

The early pioneers of Solano had many privations and many obstacles to contend with. Our first fences were ditches, brushed with limbs from the valley oaks and our houses were constructed of poles and shakes made from the valley oaks, or redwood shakes and rails hauled from the Napa redwoods, while a few bought houses shipped from Boston.

The first settlers of the county were a hardy, enterprising and intelligent set of men. They were moral and upright beyond expectation, and religious to such an extent that camp meetings and church services were the welcome order of the day, and in support of this I have only to cite to the fact that the building of the Rockville stone church was the result of only one camp meeting collection; and it would be proper for me to say further that, of the many hundreds who lived in the county in the early days, I cannot now recall the name of a single person who was condemned to the penitentiary. I wish now to touch upon an anomaly that has occurred to my mind many times during my long residence in the county, which is this: I have found that the men of Solano are all the peers of any men on the coast. There always were and are today as much brains in this section as anywhere else in the State, but it is singular and mortifying to relate that but few residents of the county have ever achieved any hearty recognition of their learning or talents until they removed beyond the borders of the county and sought and found recognition in other and more appreciative communities. Such thing arose partly from jealousy, partly from a selfish dog in the manger habit, or partly perhaps, like the Israelites of old, they believed that nothing good could come out of Nazareth. And in conclusion, I wish to say to the Native Sons, into whose hands we are about to commit the commonwealth emulate our virtues, take lessons from our enterprise, practice our self-denial, economy and benevolence, but avoid our shortcomings and mistakes; and may this matchless climate, this fruitful soil and this favored section, so far on the high road to refined civilization, become a prosperous and happy heritage to you, is the ardent wish and earnest prayer of every surviving Solano county pioneer.