



Abundant Capay Valley Oaks, as seen from The Summit in May 2010 --en route to 90th birthday party for Alfred Hayes.



HISTORY IS ALL ABOUT VIEWPOINT...

Editor, Elizabeth Monroe

...and The Greater Capay Valley Historical Society is intent on exploring them all!

I came “home” to Hungry Hollow and the Greater Capay Valley to write about my family’s long history in the area, but in the process have learned so much of interest that I have taken the advice of those I have interviewed and am publishing a journal of what I learn as I do the research.

This is journal volume 2 and will continue some threads from volume 1 and build on the overview and timeline introduced there. Newly discovered colorful local characters will be introduced as will newly interview “old-timers” and “newcomers.” Sheriff James “Sunny Jim” Monroe’s memoirs will be continued, and I will continue to ask for feedback from readers--what can you add and what have I gotten wrong?! Submissions of appropriate pictures, poems and short tales are encouraged, as are informative articles, if they tell the story of the area.

From the various historical documents I got the following:

Rancherias, Ranchos and Ranches

While the well-known story of Spanish explorers and their missions moving into Alta California, after first colonizing Mexico and Baja California, was playing itself out, to a lesser degree its effects were felt in the Capay Valley. A more in-depth study of how it played itself out here has been done by others and is in the process by others, but an overview is necessary here to help tell the story of how settlers came to this special place and its effect on the native population.

Spain sent explorers to Alta California as far as the Santa Barbara area as early as 1542, but they did not show serious interest in colonizing and populating this northern area until the 1760s. Military forts, or presidios, were established as Franciscan Friar Junipero Serra began the mission system in 1769. Small towns, or pueblos, sprang up in association with the forts and missions and began trying to attract settlers with land grants. The missions set about converting the native population to Christianity and getting them to give up their culture in favor of one more *European*; after these “neophytes” were “educated” at the missions, many were sent to



Manzanita



Uncle John’s Cabin in “Duncan’s Grove”



Cache Creek from Capay Bridge in June 2010, bordered with Willow, Cottonwood, native grasses and shrubs. Much of the water from Clear Lake is diverted to irrigation canals.

live in the pueblos or to rancherias sponsored by the mission system.

The approximately 300,000 California natives were considered much less agricultural or warlike than many tribes on the east coast or plains, thought to be due to many factors, primarily the topography and climate. They “managed” the environment more than “farmed” it, using acorns and natural roots and grasses, giving them the simplistic and somewhat offensive nickname “Digger Indians” by the early outsiders who became acquainted with them. The Capay Valley native population was similar, though not a great deal has been published about them as a group. By 1845 it is estimated that the native population of *Alta California* was half what it was when the Spanish had arrived; possibly a similar reduction occurred in the Valley as well, though the presence of Spanish colonizers was never to a great extent.

The Spanish established far fewer land grants in California than did the Mexicans, who had won their independence from Spain in 1821. Much more comfortable doing business with “foreigners,” such as trappers, traders, sailors and merchants, the Mexican government attempted to settle the area by issuing huge tracts of land to individual

landlords, not unlike the European feudal system. The present native population was meant to be left to use the land “unmolested” in an attempt to keep the peace and continue to increase the settlement claims on the land. Foreigners were able to apply for grants if they first converted to Catholicism. Governors were encouraged to issue land grants, which became ranchos of many leagues. With these ranchos, the raising and marketing of beef and hides became important commerce.

By the time adventuresome trapper Jedediah Smith came overland in 1826, a pattern was already established that opened a floodgate of interest that would so challenge the Mexican hold on the land that it would end with a war and the US taking possession of Alta California in 1847. But even that was nothing to the changes that a gold discovery in 1848 would bring. In the following year alone, about 100,000 new people came to California [some historians claim this number is too high]. The importance of wheat and cattle exploded as the hungry population grew. And California was perfect for it: dry most of the year with large expanses of natural grass lands led to dry farming, while the rolling hills led to natural cattle grazing. It wasn't long before many of those 100,000 newcomers



Iconic ancient oak on Taber Ranch, 2008



A view within the historic “Duncan’s Grove” of oaks today



figured out that there was more money to be made feeding the masses than there was to be pulled from the creeks in gold. While two of the most powerful forces in that regard are Hugh Glenn, the wheat king, and Henry Miller, the cattle king, many others found their way to large tracts of land to make their wealth and to start California dynasties of their own—many here in the greater Capay Valley area. Instead of hundreds of thousands of acres, local settlers bought up pieces of huge land grants as they became available and farmed or ranched thousands of acres in the lush valley and the flats and rolling hill areas surrounding it. In addition to wheat and cattle, the fertile valley with its natural watershed proved also suited to orchards and vineyards.

According to Eftimeos Salonites in his *Berreyesa, The Rape of the Mexican Land Grant Rancho Canada de Capay*, La Canada de Capay means the valley of the stream, which he describes as “...a beautiful valley! It is certainly a valley of hope!”

He then goes on to say, “Capay Valley during the 1840s was a wilderness with sufficient water and feed for the survival of the

animals...herds feeding on the open plains...the high peak above the valley became known as Berryessa Peak. It is over 3000 feet in elevation and is the highest peak of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which run through Yolo County. These mountains are also called the Capay Hills, for this range of mountains forms the western boundary of Capay Valley...” These old descriptions from his ancestors’ first viewings of the valley go on to say, “Within the valley, this stream seemed to run the length of the valley...lined with willow, cottonwood, some pine, and some of nature’s finest specimens of oak trees.” And speaking of the many majestic and useful oaks in the area, he goes on to tell about El Roblar, “This ancient oak grove is located across Cache Creek and north of historic Capay. It is sometimes called ‘Thousand Oaks’ or ‘Duncan Grove’.” The first name refers to its grand size and the second to the family of pioneers led by Wyatt Godfrey Duncan and his younger brother William Duncan, who bought up much of the grove area. “This enduring oak grove was known to the Californians, Spanish or Indian, as ‘El Roblar’.” After Wyatt and his brother William began to settle the area, family members continued to buy up adjacent acres on both



the north and south sides of Cache Creek, much of it covered by these magnificent oaks. For many years the locals enjoyed picnics in the grove at the invitation of the Duncan family, fording the low summer creek in buggies, on horseback, and in later years automobiles. Rodeos on the main ranch became common, as well, surrounded by these beautiful trees.

Capay Valley Oaks

The oaks being described are primarily the Valley Oak, also called White Oak, or colloquially Mush Oak, describing its softer wood and poor use as a building or burning wood. But it was valuable in many other ways. Called "The Sequoias of the Valley," in a recent article in the Sacramento Bee, the Valley oak can stand 40 to 100 feet with a canopy to match, with trunks up to 7 feet in diameter. "Adapted to our dry, hot summers and mild, wet winters, Valley oaks can live for centuries, thanks to their extensive root system. Keeping oaks healthy depends on preserving those roots...This familiar California tree forms the backbone of native habitat...providing shelter and food for many native insects, birds and other animals. That also makes it a major attraction to beneficial insects and birds..." for gardens and agriculture. And before ranchers and farmers came to the area and often removed oaks that stood in their way, the native population "farmed" and maintained the oak forests for thousands of years, the acorns being a major food staple.

The term Valley oak refers to the greater Central Valley, but helps us understand

the difference between the huge oaks we see in the Capay Valley floor, as opposed to those growing higher up in the surrounding hills. The Valley oak is the largest of the California

oaks, and is deciduous in winter, losing its leaves. The most common oaks up into the foothills are the Interior Live oak, an evergreen found up to about 5000 feet elevation, and then the Canyon Live oak found higher, up to 9000 feet. Black oak are also found between 2000 and 6000 feet, but prefer areas with snow and pine. The deciduous, usually shorter Blue oak is common below 3500 feet and can endure dry summers and triple-digit heat. A symbiotic relationship is shared by the oak and the common Scrub Jay bird. "One jay can pick up and plant 7000 acorns each fall..." carrying away and burying "about an inch or two below the surface" acorns to subsist on through the winter--but leaving enough to sprout in the spring. What is not eaten by the common gophers may someday reach 100 feet!



Of special interest is the oak's ability to hold huge amounts of water in a natural "cistern" within its root system--preventing rain run-off and allowing great drought tolerance. A recent study on this topic done at UCD has Davis and Sacramento rethinking the oak, preferring it to more recent non-natives in city planning.

Resources:

www.hastingsreserve.org :
UC Davis' 2500 acre Hasting Reserve biological field station

www.californiaoaks.org :
wealth of information on preserving California's native oaks

www.sactree.org :
The Sacramento Tree Foundation, active in oak preservation

The Sacramento Bee, October 30, 2010