

Jim Monroe Ranch
Capay, CA
Mid 1940's

Benny Pritchett is roping the calf.

Rodeos and Cowboys!

Many of our early pioneer-ancestors came to California in the mid-1850s for the golden ore, but eventually turned to a different kind of gold: grains and cattle and sheep. This area was covered half the year in the golden oats that gave this state its nickname "the Golden Gate" even

before the gold rush. It wasn't hard for these settlers from farm and ranching backgrounds to see the agricultural and stock-raising potential--someone had to feed those hungry miners still struggling in the muck and the towns springing up all around them! And where there are cattle there are cowboys, and where there are cowboys there are rodeos--and horse races!

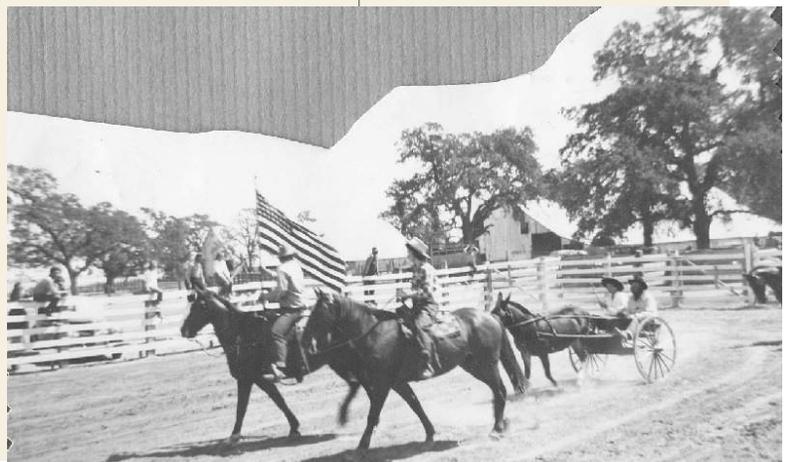
The locally familiar photo above was taken on the "Monroe Ranch" in the 1940s. A corral was built behind the homestead in the area we always called "the back pasture," but that was formerly called "The Duncan Grove"--and before that "Thousand Oaks." Rodeos were held there regularly throughout the early 1950s--continuing a long tradition of community picnics and social events held at the then-Duncan Ranch.

Established in the 1850s by brothers Wyatt Godfrey "Doc" Duncan and his brother Bill, a portion of this large ranch was bought by Doc's son-in-law, James Monroe, after he became sheriff of Yolo County from 1911 to 1939. Jim married Doc's daughter Elvira Grey in 1902, and their son James William, Jr. with his wife Lucille (Nurse) took over as ranch manager in the 1930s--continuing to live in the house where he was born in 1910, the old home built by his grandparents in 1879. A cattleman himself, Jim continued the rodeos with his younger brother Tom, who also ran cattle on the Monroe Ranch.

"On His Feet Pete" Lopez - - Bronc Buster! One participant at these rodeos was known for landing on his feet after riding "anything that would buck"!

"On his feet, Pete" Lopez—perhaps you have heard of him? A local cattleman who loved to ride a buckin' bronc and earned the nickname from his

Pete's Story continues on Pg 11



“On His Feet Pete” Lopez, continued...

appearance in many a local rodeo in the years when they were still a common occurrence in the Capay Valley. When I interviewed him recently at 89 years old, I asked him about this nickname and he chuckled and admitted he “liked to ride anything that bucked!”...and often *did* land on his feet! His parents came from Mexico and raised Pete and his siblings near Winters, where Pete attended school. They lived at the west end of Winters off Road 128 and he worked for several ranchers as a young



man—including the Meagher family of Wragg Canyon in Monticello [near what is now Lake Berryessa], where he met his future wife, Ila Lucille Meagher, six years his junior. Since she was still in high school, she said she would have to graduate before she would marry him--so after his enlistment in the Army, he came back to claim her in 1946.

During the war, he spent much time in the Philippines, where he became a well-respected boxer. He was also decorated for his bravery, which left him wounded more than once. His superior officers took a look at his record and asked him to be a personal bodyguard.

Rodeos followed a nearly 100-year tradition of Social Gatherings at “Duncan Grove”/Monroe Ranch in the Capay Valley area: 1860s through 1950s.

Pete’s Story Continues on Page 15 --and at our website greatercapayvalley.org --including a video by Betsy, with original song: “On His Feet Pete” by Douglas Nareau!!

The following quotes are from a family narrative by Frank Duncan, who was born in the original house his father Bill and his elder brother “Doc” built; and from Ada Merhoff’s history, **Capay Valley The Land & The People 1846-1900**: On page 127 of Ada’s book: *“Horse racing was probably the earliest sports attraction enjoyed by the general public; since the early 1860s breeding farms were producing high quality animals to meet the demand of racetracks spaced over the county.”* [One was near what has been traditionally called “Brown’s Corner” at the west end of Woodland.] Referring to downtown Capay, Frank Duncan reminisced, *“There was a big race track that started right where that big oak tree stands in the upper end of town, and we were always having races there. It was the day of horses, and I can remember Doc Craig and John Nixon and Bob Benham racing there, horses and foot races too.”* And, according to Ada’s tome, the following quotes were carried in a local paper, *“The sporting fraternity of Capay indulged in a number of horse races last Saturday...the day was one of marked excitement.”* And *“Foot races were fast becoming an equally entertaining pastime, as challenges were exchanged between individuals as well as community teams...”* In the 1880s, Duncans Grove was the large clearing we called the “back pasture” where locals held an annual event: the Odd Fellows Picnic each April 25th, and other recitals, socials, Sunday Buggy Drives--and the frequent rodeos once the corral was built! Frank Duncan recalls, *“The band always rode to the grove in a big four-horse stage driven by Lane Duncan, and my father [Bill Duncan] always insisted that for the use of the grove the band should play when it passed our house.”* Quotes Ada: *“There were foot races, contests, cartwheels and somersaults, leapfrog and fiddle playing for dancing under the big oaks—and there were friends and relatives sitting on the ground on cloths or aprons to eat cold meat, home canned fruits and frosted cakes...gallons of lemonade...for some of the youngsters, there would be ‘the taste of ice cream for the very first time ever’.”* (Pg 134) Prior to the first bridge in 1884, Hungry Hollow people had to paddle or pole a big flat-bottomed ferry boat between informal docks when the creek was running high. After the bridge, the Duncan Brothers opened their grove to the locals for social gatherings, including “reunion style get-togethers, holiday celebrations, and special events.” (Pg 134) Prior to that, their land on the Capay side of Cache Creek offered a dance pavilion and shady spot in the southern part of the “grove” of Valley Oaks.



The Duncan Brothers' Ranch was featured in the De Pue and Company Atlas of Yolo County, 1879--the edition published the same year the brothers completed their home in Hungry Hollow, just north of Capay and Cache Creek. In the etching below you can see the town of then-Langville, [later, Capay, in 1888] in the left distance; the new home with original log cabin in rear; farming equipment for the 2000 cultivated acres of the over-8000 acre ranch.

The illustrated atlas and history of Yolo County, Cal. Containing a history of California from 1513 to 1850, a history of Yolo County from 1825 to 1880, with statistics of agriculture, education, churches, elections, lithographic views of farms, residences, mills &c., portraits of well-known citizens, and the official county map. De Pue & Company. 1879. Jos. Winterburn & Co., Printers, 417 Clay Street, San Francisco.

Author: De Pue & Company

Date: 1879

This historical cartographic image is part of the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com, a large collection of online antique, rare, old, and historical maps, atlases, globes, charts, and other cartographic items. [Read more about the Collection.](#) Or you can view the entire David Rumsey Map Collection in Insight.

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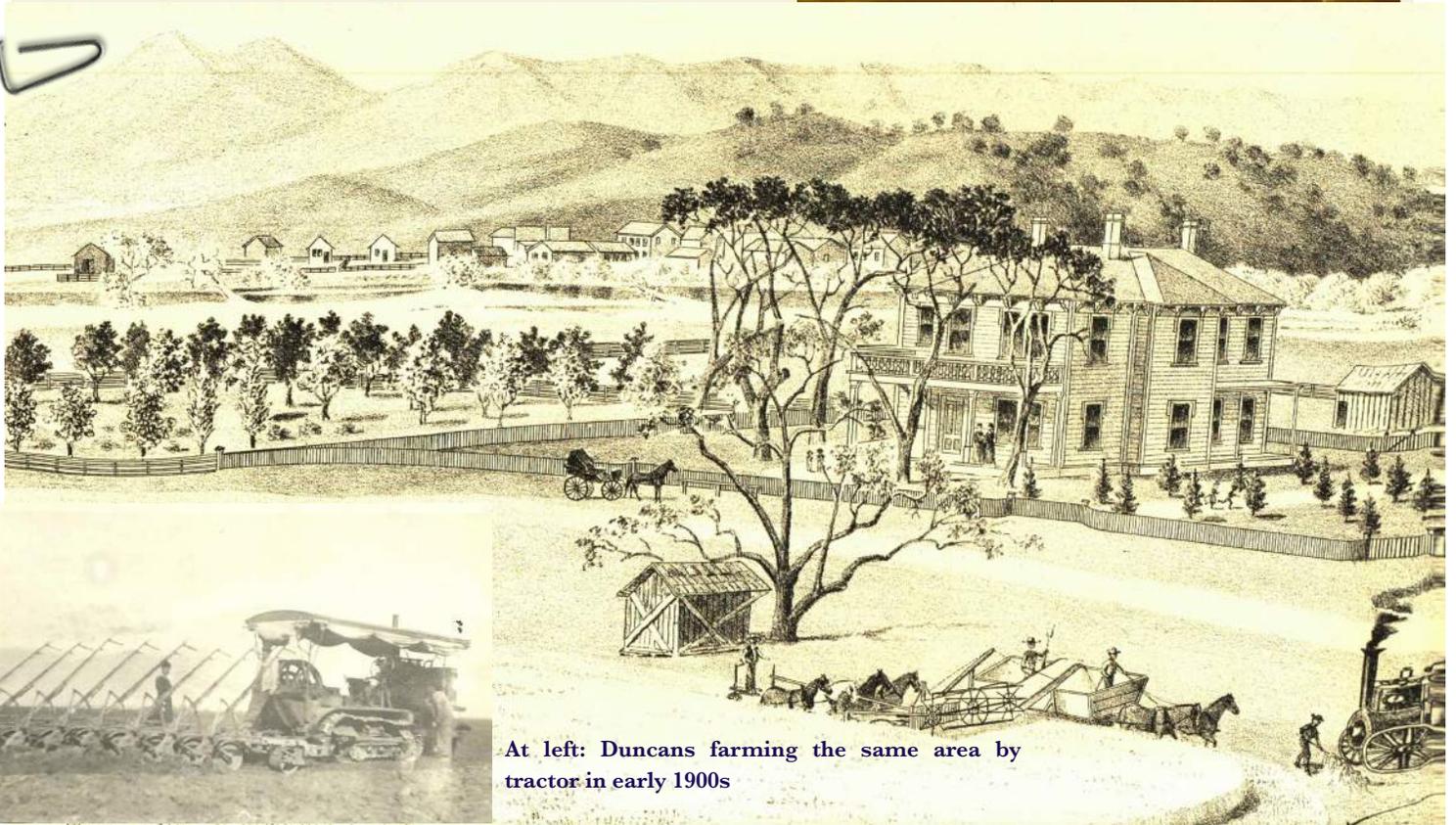
Author: De Pue & Company

Date: 1879

Short Title: Title Page: Yolo Co. atlas, history.

Publisher: San Francisco: De Pue & Company

Below, top down: family photos of the house in about 1900 [“Doc” and his son Wyatt, Jr. on the front porch]; and one from the 1950-60s.



At left: Duncans farming the same area by tractor in early 1900s



Below, pictures from the 1950s of features depicted in the etching done in 1879. Note: original home [where Frank Duncan was born] below at left looks like the one below it in the etching, but the porch was later walled-in, creating a dine-in kitchen, seen in the later photo to its right. The 1940s photo of the barn shows the original one in the etching. At right, the Monroe-Donnenwirth kids stand above the ranch canal in the 1950s, facing the farmstead across the "back pasture" site of the rodeos and earlier social gatherings--by then, cattle had replaced the sheep of the 1879 etching.

Photos courtesy of Martha Monroe and husband Ray Donnenwirth. Etching from *De Pue Atlas 1879*, courtesy of Yolo County Archives:

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