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by History Editor  
Skip Sommer

## The First Settlers Describe Sonoma County

Imagine the wealth of beauty and bounty that these first immigrants saw when they paused their wagons to behold this magic place. I felt a terrific thrill myself in 1957 when I first came here. But I had arrived in a Chrysler with air conditioning and I had suffered no ills from a six-month trip through the wilderness. Theirs was a first look. Not mine. It must have been breathtaking. Here are some quotes from the 1800s:

"Several mastodons have been found protruding from Petaluma Creek and one tusk found," wrote a lad in 1880.

"The average rainfall here is perfect. We have never lost a crop to drought. It commences to rain in October and ends in May. As soon as it rains, the hills turn green and the cattle feed."

"Even in December, it seldom goes as low as 37 degrees above zero and in late January, the almond trees blossom and the robins come," wrote a young girl home to her grandma in Missouri. "Grain may be sown in January, February or March and it will produce well." Can you imagine what that meant to a farmer from the midwest or east? They could still do their

*Lumber stacked at Golden Eagle Milling Company at the Petaluma River Turning Basin awaits shipment to San Francisco and Sacramento. (Photo courtesy Petaluma Museum.)*



fall planting too!

"May is like May back home. The peach and cherry trees bloom this month." After the rainy season, the farmers found that the crops were still watered by fogs and first harvest was ready by late July. It seemed as if each year produced a good crop -- 80 to 100 bushels of wheat per acre mostly -- because of the July and August fogs.

"The fog spreads through the county late in the afternoon, continues through the night and disappears after sunrise. We estimate that three heavy fogs equal about a light rain."

"The grass keeps green longer and this helps the productivity of the dairy cows and the length of the wool on the sheep."

"There seems to be no extreme of heat or cold here. It is probable that more roses bloom in this county than in all the hot houses of New England!" This kind of enthusiastic letter home was a terrific advertisement and more and more settlers came out to see the golden land.

"The same clothing may be worn here all the year around," wrote a young lad. (Of course, that was before Nordstrom.)

"There seems to be a warm strata of air in the hills, a few hundred feet above the valleys. Here, oranges, lemons, limes, English walnuts, almond and pomegranate trees grow well. And, there are thousands of acres of this kind of land in Sonoma County which can be bought for \$15 to \$20 per acre." (I only wish I could have done that.)

"The valley fronts on San Pablo Bay to the south and has a salty estuary leading inland which is navigable for eighteen miles for craft of considerable size. It is called Petaluma Creek."

"Sonoma County has an immense source of wealth in its timber. The great redwood, fed by alluvial soil grows to

# STORIES FROM THE PAST



*From 1883 to 1920, the steamer Gold carried freight and settlers to Petaluma and produce south to San Pablo Bay. (Photo courtesy Petaluma Museum.)*

a prodigious size," wrote a young lad to his lumberjack father in Virginia. Going on, he said, "They grow in some cases to over 350 feet and have a diameter of 15 feet. It is said that just one of these trees can produce 65,000 feet of lumber worth at least a thousand dollars!" Come on out, Pa!

The redwood, of course, needs fog. It is a close-grained timber that splits and saws well and does not warp or shrink -- a most durable asset. The loggers flooded in. Towns like Occidental became "company towns", where many lived full-time until all the trees were gone.

The huge stumps in the forests along the Russian River attest to the cutting that went on there. Until the steam engine was invented, all those logs were hauled out to the mills by oxen and men. It was a backbreaking job and only the toughest men took it. Many men who survived the trails, and then the fist- and gunfights in the gold fields, lost their lives in accidents with saws, axes, animals, and tree-felling. (There was no penicillin in those days.)

By 1860, Sulfur Springs became a big tourist attraction for Sonoma County. The springs were called "The Chemical Laboratory of the Almighty". Resorts gradually grew around these springs. Skaggs, Litton, Mark West,

and White Sulfur were the best-known springs. By 1865, they were regular resorts attracting people from all over the world. In 1873, Skaggs Springs could accommodate more than 300 guests. The springs, you see, were considered "very healing for the many ills that flesh is heir to".

Meanwhile, in Petaluma, the benefits from all this bounty found a shipping point of no slight regard. Petaluma Creek was bustling with trade boats by 1865 and supplies, produce, people, and animals were loaded and unloaded every day to travel up and down the creek. San Francisco, Sacramento, and all stops in between were insatiable users of the vast amounts of produce coming out of the Sonoma and Napa Valleys. And the ranchers constantly needed supplies from the bigger cities.

More and more people moved here to supply labor for the needs of this transit. Feed mills sprung up. Warehouses and docks were built, roads were improved, and Petaluma Creek hosted more navigation than any other in the state. Petaluma was now a major shipping point. Without it, the vast fertile acres of the North Bay would have had a serious problem getting their goods to market on time and unspoiled.

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