

Today begins a new column focusing on Solano County history. Each week this year we celebrate the sesquicentennial of Solano County - one of the original 27 counties of California, created in February 1850. No other county shows such diversity, from Benicia's waterfront through marshland and rolling hills to the central valley at Dixon, from agriculture to biotechnology - not to mention that Solano is the only county to have once hosted two state capitols.

Throughout the coming year, this column will look at different aspects of the county's diverse history. Settlement in California began more than 10,000 years ago, with remarkably diverse groups of people coming into the region in successive waves. California's native population is estimated to have numbered about 310,000 before the Spanish explorers arrived.

In Solano County, native Californians mostly belonged to the group of Patwin Indians, a tribal subgroup of the larger Wintun culture. The term Patwin was the native word for "people."

The Patwin villages Malacas, Suisun and Tolenas were located in the Fairfield-Suisun region. In the Vacaville area, a large number lived near Ulatis Creek.

Only a few thousand Patwin Indians lived in Solano County at any time prior to the Spanish arrival. While the Patwin territory covers most of the Solano County area, two Plains Miwok villages were located near the Rio Vista area, and a Bay Miwok village was found near Sherman Island.

The Patwin Indians lived in small groups composed of several families. Each group occupied a village, complete with dwellings, a sweathouse that also served as a residence for the men, and a menstrual house for women during menstruation or childbirth. In addition, larger settlements had a ceremonial dance house, which formed the center of the village. Each dwelling was occupied by two or more families who shared a central fireplace.

Acorns, seeds, waterfowl and fish formed the staples of the Patwin diet. Like other native Californian groups, they may have tended the land through controlled burns, pruning, weeding, irrigation and selective replanting. Yet their small population numbers allowed them to live off the land without altering the landscape.

By the second quarter of the 19th century, the tragic culture clash with missionaries led to the disappearance of the American Indians from this area, which in turn contributed to a changed ecosystem. With fewer human hunters around, the numbers of rodents, deer, antelope and elk multiplied. Grizzly bears became so common that early American settler John Wolfskill was forced to sleep in a tree for protection while he constructed his house on the banks of Putah Creek in 1842.

With the Spanish settlers, foreign germs, grasses and animals were introduced. Hearty Mediterranean weeds and annuals replaced the native flora. The large cattle herds consumed acres of grass, eroding hillsides and streambanks in the process. Luzena Stanley Wilson recalled in her memoir about 1850: "The bands of Spanish cattle which covered the whole country - they were dangerous to encounter, even mounted, and to anyone on foot they were certain death."

Josiah Allison, another early settler who crossed Solano County on his way from the gold mines in 1852, also remembered the green grass as high as his horse's head. When he brought his family back to settle two years later, they were astonished to find that turnips grew as big as water buckets, the soil was so fertile. Large numbers of the newcomers had sought their luck in the gold mines and quickly realized that their fortunes lay elsewhere. Many had agricultural roots, and the wide-open prairie and fertile valleys enchanted them.

Luzena Stanley Wilson's memoir includes a description of the prairie in spring: "A sheet of waving grass and bright-hued wild flowers, trackless and unenclosed," she wrote. A few lines later she added, "We were fascinated by the beauty of the little valley, which already bore the name of Vaca from the Spanish owner of the grant within the limits of which it lay. The green hills smiled down at us through their sheeny veil of grass. The great oak trees, tall and stately, bent down their friendly arms as if to embrace us; the nodding oats sang a song of peace and plenty to the music of the soft wind; the inquisitive wild flowers, peeping up with round, wide-opened eyes from the edge of every foot-path bade us stay. We made up our minds, if possible, to buy land and settle."