

A BIG PUDDLE –
The Early Laguna de Santa Rosa

By

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INTRODUCTION

This paper augments the historical information in the author's earlier 2003 paper on the Laguna ("Crystal Laughing Waters") and provides an annotated and broader understanding of the role of the Laguna de Santa Rosa during the early county.

Most of the early Petaluma newspaper articles cited or summarized in this paper for the period between 1855 and the summer of 1893 were obtained from the microfilm files of the forerunners or the different names of the *Argus*, but for convenience, the articles are referenced by their original designations of the newspapers in which they appeared.

PJ&A – the *Petaluma Journal and Sonoma County Advertiser*

SCJ – the *Sonoma County Journal*

PA – the *Petaluma Argus*

PJ&A – the *Petaluma Journal and Argus*

PWA – the *Petaluma Weekly Argus*

Microfilm copies of the *Argus* are unfortunately not available for most of the 1890s (a gap after December 29, 1888 until January 1899). The gap necessitated switching to the *Petaluma Courier* (PC). But again unfortunately for regional county historical research, the *Courier* changed from a regional weekly newspaper to a daily city and town oriented newspaper on December 4, 1891. Further scanning of the daily newspaper for information relevant to the Laguna became very inefficient and unacceptably laborious, and was terminated in the summer of 1893.

Also for convenience, the upper and lower case letters in the articles cited faithfully duplicates the cases used in the title of the original newspaper article. The variation in the spellings also faithfully duplicates the spellings used in the original newspaper article.

While long quotes from the old newspaper articles are in parentheses, the language used in the summaries often attempts to duplicate the language "flavor" of the original newspaper articles and is often not in parentheses.

The author's comments are in small print following the references to the old newspaper articles.

PJ&SCA – October 6, 1855 Petaluma and Santa Rosa Valleys

Extracted from a letter to the California Farmer, this article describes the westerly drainage of the Santa Rosa Valley as “ending in a laguna at the base of the Coast Range, which vents itself to [the] Russian River.” Of particular interest, this article also refers to the village of Santa Rosa, describes the northern part of the valley as being “well covered in oaks,” and opinions that the valley will in time due to artesian borings, “smile with venture and blossom like a rose.”

SCJ – April 6, 1860 HARD ROAD TO TRAVEL

This article was reprinted verbatim in my earlier historical paper (Cummings, 2003 p3) and as previously noted, the article’s statement that stage coach passengers landing at Sebastopol could be conveyed by the little steamer, *Georgina* (presumably down the Laguna) warranted caution in interpretation and further analysis. While not the booming lumbering area following the arrival of the narrow gage coast railroad in the early fall of 1876 (Wilson, 1999), the following analysis strongly supports a literal interpretation of the old newspaper article – that the *Georgina* went from Sebastopol to the redwood logging and milling region of the lower Russian River in the early spring of 1860.

Analysis

The title and the first sentence (“HARD ROAD TO TRAVEL – The stage drivers find Jorden a hard road to travel, about this time.”) appears to be a spelling variant of a biblical reference and is undoubtedly a very realistic description of the early spring road conditions in the county at the time. A recent editorial in the *Sonoma County Journal* had complained that there was not a five mile stretch of road in the county without a stream or “bottomless mud hole” (long stretches of sand such as on the Petaluma to Sebastopol road were equally vexing to summer time travel at the time). Throughout early California, what roads there were at the time, were often little more than cleared, double tracks of wagon and stage coach trails. About a month before this article appeared, a new state law directed county supervisors to designate district road overseers and to build and improve roads in their counties. Since at least 1858, a poll tax system was required of all males in California over 21 (until age 50 or 60) to either work two days per year on their local roads or pay an annual poll tax (initially only \$2.00, and later the alternative of local road work was discontinued). More than a decade after this article appeared, the Petaluma road district approved a special tax to macadamize its roads with “asphaltum.”

The first part of the second sentence (“The trip from this city to the steamboat if made by horse and steam power,” refers to taking the steamer *Petaluma* to San Francisco (from Rudesill’s landing at Haystack, about two and one-half miles from town down Petaluma Creek). Advertisements at the time, describe the *Petaluma* as being built expressly for the Petaluma to San Francisco route and as a “new favorite steamer” with Captain McKensie and Agent C.M. Baker, with stops at Lakeville and Point San Quentin. (The *Petaluma* was advertised as new in late October of 1857.) While a group of prominent citizens of Petaluma in early 1860 had received state authorization to straighten and deepen Petaluma Creek and build a new wharf at Italian Gardens, about one-half mile closer to town, it was not until the summer of 1862 that the creek was deepened and straightened, and a new wharf was built at Italian Gardens. The iron horse railroad from town to the new steamboat wharf did not chug and snort into Petaluma until the summer of 1864. (The connecting railroad’s original steam engine tragically blew-up in late August 1866, and was replaced with horses and mules.)

A year before this article appeared, Doyle and Rudesill advertised their Steam Boat Coach Bus Line to Rudesill’s landing, but no similar ad was found in early 1860. Since G.A. Runk was reported to have sold such a stage line to J.B. Hinkle in February 1863, it is highly likely that a stage coach operated between Petaluma and the steamboat landing at Haystack in the early spring of 1860. However, the road to Haystack was undoubtedly in very poor condition. A newspaper editorial at the end of October 1862 noted that the Haystack road would soon be in terrible condition and appealed to allow the road to become a private turnpike. (Many early roads throughout the county were built and maintained as private turnpikes with user tolls.) Since the article clearly states that travel from Petaluma to the steamboat “is made by horse and steam power,” it appears that the only means of travel to the steamboat that used both methods of power at the time, would have incorporated little, shallow draft steam “lighters.” San Francisco bound

freight and passengers from Petaluma would have had the non-bone jarring option of traveling to Haystack in little lighters which were safely and reliably able to navigate the crooked and shallow upper reach of Petaluma Creek.

The second part of sentence two (“the coaches landing their passengers at Sebastopol, from which point they are conveyed by the little steamer *Georgina*.”) strongly implies that the *Georgina* went down the Laguna to the Russian River at the time, but the article does not state the destination of such passengers – the crux of this analysis. While this article was written nearly ten years before Captain King of the steamer *Enterprise* unsuccessfully attempted to travel from the lower Russian River upstream to Healdsburg (essentially disproving that Healdsburg could be reliably reached by boat), it is highly unlikely that the *Georgina*’s destination was Healdsburg. It is far more likely that the *Georgina*’s destination was the redwood logging and lumbering region of the lower Russian River.

It is also highly unlikely that the “Sebastopol” stated in the article was not in Sonoma County. The Post Office in Sebastopol, Napa County, did not change its name to “Yountsville” until the beginning of 1868, nearly eight years after this article appeared. While the *Sonoma County Journal* commonly included news stories outside of Sonoma County, events outside of the county were fastidiously identified as to their locations. All articles not identified as to their locations are assumed to refer to locations in Sonoma County. Given the primitive road conditions in the early county, especially in the early spring after the winter rains, travel would have been much like the exploration period of the area. Travel by boat on any possible waterway, as perilous and adventurous as it often was, would have been preferred over travel by land.

W.S.M. Wright was awarded a franchise for a toll ferry across the Russian River below Duncans’ mills in November 1862. About a year later, L.(Lew) W. Miller’s Bloomfield and Bodega stage line was extended to Duncans’ mills. (The new town of Duncans Mills, across the river from Mosco, formed in the winter of 1877 on land purchased from John Orr. In the early spring of the same year, Samuel M. Duncan, the town’s first postmaster, was reported to be building a “fine residence” in the new town.) Without question, while Duncan’s town did not form until over sixteen years after this newspaper article was published, the redwood logging and lumbering region of the lower Russian River was undoubtedly active in the early spring of 1860.

W. (Winfield) S.M. Wright owned a relatively large ranch near the mouth of the Russian River below Duncans’ mills in 1860. Winfield Wright was one of the most prominent and wealthiest men in the early county. He was one of only eight men in 1869 that had county assessed values of over \$100,000 and was reported to have paid the largest amount of tax in the county in 1872. A year later, Wright was advertised as being a major stock holder in the Bank of Sonoma County and was successfully elected to the state Assembly, but served only one term. The Honorable Winfield Wright and others were reported to be starting to manufacture a rotary harrow in Santa Rosa in April 1875. By 1879 Wright was one the largest land owners in the county with over 6,000 acres. Coincidentally, Winfield Wright owned the small property next to Santa Rosa Creek which was acquired by the city for Santa Rosa’s first sewer farm in early 1889 (Cummings, 2001).

The first part of the third sentence (“From Petaluma to Bodega, it requires all of ‘Dill Bibbitts’ skill as an engineer to make the rifle,”) is essentially a play on the name of Bill Tibbetts. (Newspaper articles spelt Bill’s last name with an “i” however, his ad for his company spelt his last name with an “e.”) Bill Tibbetts was the owner and operator of the U.S.M. line of stages from Petaluma to the “potato mines” at Bodega (via Stony Point, Millar and Walker’s store and the village of Sebastopol). About four months after this article was published, Bill “Whip” Tibbetts was humorously referred to in another *Journal* article as a fast stage driver – “that very prince of jolly Jehues.” After the civil war Tibbetts was referred to as “Colonel Tibbetts” and drove the stage from Santa Rosa connecting to the new little steamer *Joise McNair* in Petaluma, offering for the first time a one-day round trip between Santa Rosa and San Francisco. Col. Tibbetts and his partner, John Orr, purchased Wilson’s Exchange in Sebastopol in early May 1866. Wilson’s Exchange was a hotel and ballroom in Sebastopol completed in 1860 and joined Joaquin Carrillo’s Analy Hotel at the time. But by the spring of 1870 the hotel was again referred to as Wilson’s Exchange. The building was referred to as Mrs. E.G. Wilson’s hotel in the reports of Sebastopol’s great fire in late August 1881. (John Orr was a relatively large land owner and prominent citizen in the western county at the time. Tuomey’s, 1926 biography of John’s son, T.F., includes much information on the father.)

The rest of the third sentence (“while a trip between here and Healdsburg is only accomplished with the utmost difficulty, ox-power being required it is said, to help the coach out of some of the mud holes!”) appears to be a literal description of the road conditions at the time between Petaluma and Healdsburg, and is probably not much of an exaggeration.

An attempt was made to research the name of the little steamer, *Georgina*, hoping to independently verify that such a boat operated between Sebastopol and the lower Russian River in 1860. Mac Mullen (1944) describes a little 30 ton, side wheel steamer named the *Georgiana* which was built in 1850 for use on the upper San Joaquin River, but was promptly replaced by a more suitable, small shallow draft stern wheeler. Mac Mullen also reports that the *Georgiana*

blew-up in Petaluma in late November 1855. Lynch (1997) cites old NWP railroad records to identify two little steamers, one of which was named the *Georgina*, which operated on the Sonoma and San Francisco route between 1850 and 1865. An article in the December 3, 1875 addition of the *Petaluma Weekly Argus* states that the *Georgina* running the Sonoma and San Francisco route, began running the Petaluma and San Francisco route on September 17, 1855 – about two months before it blew-up in Petaluma. A November 24, 1855 article in the *Petaluma Weekly Journal and Sonoma County Advertiser* indeed reports on the blowing up of the boiler of a steamer in Petaluma, but contrary to Mac Mullen, the boat is named the *Georgina*. (Subsequent articles reporting on the coroner’s jury on the death of the boats engineer and a later newspaper editorial urging local steam captains not to race their boats, also names the tragic boat as the *Georgina*.) A letter in the Petaluma newspaper describing a Petaluma resident’s trip to the Salmon River mines in Oregon in early 1862, describes taking a lighter named the *Georgiana* to Haystack landing (the article describes the *Georgiana* as being a “fast packet” and does not indicate that the boat was powered by steam). To add to the confusion in the names *Georgiana* and *Georgina*, Heig’s (1982) book on the history of Petaluma quotes directly from the relevant newspaper articles, but substitutes the name *Georgiana* rather than *Georgina* as in the original newspaper articles cited. The centennial addition of the *Petaluma Argus Courier* (August 18, 1955) tells the story of the 1855 steamboat catastrophe of the *Georgina* as in the original newspaper articles. The Maritime Museum in San Francisco has apparently no records of local steamboats named either the *Georgina* or the *Georgiana*.

The records search on the name *Georgina* or *Georgiana* did not provide an independent verification that one could take the *Georgina* from Sebastopol to the redwood logging and milling region of the lower Russian River in the spring of 1860. However, a report nearly twenty seven years later in January 1887 that the beautiful little steam yacht called the *Pride of the Laguna* would soon be making tri-weekly trips from Sebastopol (down the Laguna) to Guerneville, strongly supports the interpretation of early travel down the Laguna from Sebastopol and then down the Russian River to the redwood region of the lower river.

SCJ – August 3, 1860 SEBASTOPOL

This is a great article on the early history of Sebastopol. The article refers to the Laguna as “a fine fishing stream (see Cummings, 2003 p 3).

PA – December 24, 1861 STUCK IN THE MUD

The stage from Santa Rosa came into Petaluma very late. The stage had been swamped in the “Lagoona.” The team had been rescued from drowning and the lady passengers had been carried to “terafirma.”

The Petaluma and Santa Rosa road at the time appears to have crossed the upper Laguna near where Cotati/Rohnert Park is today.

PA – December 31, 1861 Settlers vs. Grants

The article begins with an English copy of the original Mexican land grant of Joaquin “Corillo” for the “Solano de Santa Rosa” (Llanos de Santa Rosa ?) rancho by the “Lagunas” dated March 29, 1844 in Monterey and signed by Micheltorena. The land grant is followed by the OPINION OF THE [U.S. LAND] COMMISSIONERS, which approved the grant request of Joaquin “Corilo” for his three square league grant (13,316 acres). The opinion of commissioners Thompson and Campbell dated October 21, 1853 was that Joaquin “Corillo” had satisfied all of the legal requirements and that his claim should be confirmed. (The deposition of M.G. Vallejo was accepted by the commission – that the grant claim had been occupied by the claimant in 1841 or 1842, that the claimant had first built a house on the land in 1843 or 1844 and that he has since built a very large house on the land, and that the claimant has horses and cattle on the land with 300 acres in corn, barley, beans and wheat.)

PA—January 7, 1862	Settlers vs. Grants
PA – January 14, 1862	Settlers vs. Grants
PA – January 21, 1862	Settlers vs. Grants
PA – January 28, 1862	Settlers vs. Grants
PA – February 4, 1862	Settlers vs. Grants

C.F. Kelly details in series of five lengthy articles the settlers' position challenging the validity of the Mexican land grants. The first two articles focus from the settlers' point of view, on the validity of Joaquin Carrillo's land grant request and the favorable action of the Land Commissioners. Essentially Kelly doubted the truth of the testimony supporting the grant (no house was ever built on grant land, Carrillo's adobe was on the west side of the "Lagunos" and west of his land grant request, there were no signs that the grant land had ever been cultivated, that a large sum of money had been paid to induce the survey and establish the boundaries of the grant, etc.). He considered the document submitted to be a forgery since the original grant was for the "Llagunos de Santa Rosa" and had been overwritten with "Llanos de Santa Rosa." Kelly opined that the grant should be for the land west of the "Lagunos" and not the valley land to the east of the "Lagunos," and he called for a new survey of Carrillo's boundaries. Kelly's following three articles focus on many other technical and legal arguments from the settlers' point of view, which challenge the validity of the Mexican land grants in general.

Kelly's last article is followed by a lengthy history of the Mexican land grant which clouded the titles of all parcels in the growing town of Petaluma – a town built on grant land.

PA – March 26, 1862 Settlers Meeting

The article reports that a large and enthusiastic meeting of settlers was held near Santa Rosa and that a large number of them had joined the "Settler's Home Guard." Certain settlers had already been notified by the claimants of the Joaquin "Corillo" grant to lease, buy, vacate their land and homes, or pay a penalty for being in contempt of court, but the group resolved not to comply with such demands. The group also declared that the "Corillo" grant was a forgery and resolved that they would have nothing to do with it. They also claimed and demanded governmental protection against the swindle and the group called for the aid of citizens throughout the state of California.

Unlike several other areas in the county where settler disputes of the Mexican land grants led to the so called "squatter wars" (LeBaron, 1991), squatters on Joaquin Carrillo's Llano de Santa Rosa appear to have settled their disputes rather amiably – at least no newspaper stories to the contrary were found.

Final recognition of Joaquin Carrillo's rancho lands would have allowed him to sell or lease portions of his land to the about fifty settlers within the surveyed area of his grant (the settler's request for a new survey was denied). Relative to the Laguna, Millar and Walker acquired title to nearly 4,000 acres of Carrillo's rancho land for a large Spanish cattle ranch.

The road pattern of government land with its section line roads exactly one mile apart, is still very evident in the north east Laguna north of Occidental Road (Piezzi Lane, Willowside Road, Guerneville and Piner roads, etc.). Harrison Valentine, the original settler of the land of which a portion is now the City of Santa Rosa's Stone Reclamation Farm (Harris, 1980), settled on land to the immediate north of Carrillo's grant. While he was never a squatter, Valentine probably would have not been certain that he was not a squatter until after the completion of the U.S. government survey of the area.

PJ&A – June 2, 1864 DROWNED

The 16 year-old son of John McReynolds drowned in the Lagoon near Sebastopol. His body was recovered several hours later by the assistance of Indian divers.

PJ&A – July 28, 1864 BADLY SOLD

The rebel, W.L. Anderson, telegraphed from Santa Rosa that the three noted rebels of Sebastopol (Dr. Harris, Wilson and Valentine) had been arrested for treason and would be sent to Alcatraz. In the evening when the stage arrived from Sebastopol, Democracy rejoiced – the report was a hoax.

The Valentine referred to in the article is undoubtedly Harrison Valentine, born in the South and one of the first settlers in the county. At the time the article was written, southern born, southern sympathizers and southern supporters, were often simply referred to as “rebels” by staunch Unionists. That Democracy should include those with divergent views is the overall point of this article.

PJ&A – December 14, 1865 CITIZENS MEETING

Citizens of Petaluma and vicinity met in McCune’s Hall to consider changes in the boundary line between the counties of Marin and Sonoma. The proposed new boundary of Marin County would be moved north to the mouth of the Russian River, thence up the river to Mark West Creek (also know as Mill Creek at the time), thence up the creek to the Laguna and up the Laguna to North Santa Rosa Creek, thence up Santa Rosa Creek to opposite Santa Rosa and thence on a line going directly east to the border with Napa County. The meeting appointed a committee (A. McCune, H.L. Weston and H. Meacham) to form a larger group to take the necessary steps to secure the passage of an act by the state legislature for the new boundary line of Marin County.

This early attempt to divide the county suggests that to some residents of Petaluma, it was much better to be in Marin County than to stay in Sonoma County with the much smaller and dominant southern town of Santa Rosa as the county seat. However, many folk in Marin County were not excited or pleased to make Tomales their new county seat. Since at least by 1860, there had been a number of proposals by Petaluma residents to rectify the perceived injustice of Santa Rosa being made the county seat. The problem was discussed openly in the Petaluma newspaper in August 1860 and the *Argus* was later chastised for supporting a petition submitted to the state legislature in the same year to move the Sonoma County seat to Petaluma. Such a state bill was reported to have been approved by the legislature in March of 1861.

PJ&A – October 4, 1866 CATTLE STEALING

Sixty-odd head of “beeves,” cows and calves were stolen from John Walker’s ranch. Walker searched and recovered forty-odd head in San Rafael, San Pablo and San Francisco. While the thieves had earlier attempted to sell the stolen cattle to Petaluma people on Paper Mill Creek, the thieves “have probably made good their escape.”

John Walker and his partner, Dr. Joseph Morgan Millar (usually spelt Miller), who had long since given up practicing as a physician, opened the regions first trading post in 1850 near a ford across the Laguna south of what became the town of Sebastopol. The partners also acquired nearly one third of Carrillo’s grant for a 4,000-acre cattle ranch. Dr. Millar died in the Walker home near the village of Sebastopol in late January 1875. In visiting Santa Rosa in the late 1880s, John Walker, now a millionaire, was referred to in the *Sonoma Democrat* as the “cattle king of Sebastopol.” John Walker died in the late 1890s and both he and Dr. Millar are buried in Sebastopol’s Pleasant Hill Cemetery (McClure, 2004; 2005).

