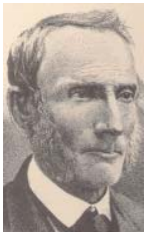
History Lessons



How one Sacramento area rancher - John Wolfskill - shaped the way we farm, what we grow and how we do it

Argonauts poured into the Sacramento Valley in the early 1850s, mining hillsides and creek beds for gold. Rancher John Wolfskill was living in the area at the time and had a lot in common with those miners. He was a pioneer raised in the wilds of Missouri who had survived the long, hard journey to California in search of a better life. But he had no interest in joining the rush for gold.

"Wolfskill was a horticulturalist at heart," says author and historian Joann Leach Larkey. "He was living and working on lush, fertile land along Putah Creek – that was his goldmine."

John Reid Wolfskill believed agriculture could become California's true treasure, a conviction he cultivated and a legacy he left to Yolo and Solano counties, UC Davis and the entire agricultural industry. This is the story of how one man with a satchel of seeds made a difference.

The roots at Wolfskill Experimental Orchards run deep, including Wolfskill planted more than 150 years ago. ***Photo by Debbie Aldridge***

ding those of this majestic olive tree
ridge / UC Davis

A born horticulturalist

John Reid Wolfskill was born in 1804 in Boonesbourgh, KY, and raised in the wilds of Missouri, then a new territory. Like other pioneer children of the time and place (such as Kit Carson and Davy Crockett), John was well versed in farming, raising livestock, hunting and trapping. John was one of five brothers who eventually headed west.

The first to leave was the eldest brother, William. He arrived in New Mexico in 1821 when the area was still held and administered by the Mexican government. William spent 10 years trapping in the area and, in 1828, became a Mexican citizen. In 1831, William led a company of trappers from Santa Fe to Los Angeles, opening the Santa Fe Trail to California in the process. William laid down roots in Los Angeles and turned to planting grapes and fruit trees, a move that would make him both rich and famous. (In 1857, William became the first man to grow oranges commercially in California and he would eventually own the world largest orange grove of its day.) William married into an influential Mexican family and became prominent in southern California society.

John left home in 1828 and spent ten years freighting between New Mexico and the mining districts of Northern Mexico before he headed west to California, weathering sickness, thievery, high rivers and deep snow. John was so thin and weathered when he arrived in Southern California in 1838, William didn't even recognize him. They joined forces and John helped in the business of growing fruit. (He also managed William's winery.)

John longed for a ranch of his own. In 1840, he headed north to see what he could find. He stopped in Sonoma to ask General Mariano Vallejo's permission to scout the area. The General said he could look, but because he wasn't a Mexican citizen, he would never be granted any land. John pushed on to Putah Creek and the land where the city of Winters now stands. He was smitten. Acres and acres of wild oats grew taller than his horse's back, a sure sign of fertile soil. The land along Putah Creek had a steady source of water and was slightly higher than the surrounding valley – perfect for the agricultural life he so wanted to lead.

Not so perfect was trying to obtain a land grant from the Alta California government. As promised, Vallejo refused to authorize a grant to John Wolfskill. Two years of diplomatic negotiations ensued.

In the end, it was William's Mexican citizenship that helped seal the deal. On May 24, 1842, Governor Juan Bautista de Alvarado granted four

Olive trees still line the entry to what was once the Wolfskill family home.

square Mexican leagues, over 17,750 acres, to William Wolfskill. Brother John set out a short time later with cattle, oxen, a few horses and a satchel of cuttings and seeds to settle on his dream land.

Four leagues was relatively small compared to other Mexican land grants, but local legend has it John wanted only as much land as he could cover on horseback in one day from sunup to sundown. On current maps, the four leagues include 10,750 acres in what became Solano County and 7,004 acres in Yolo County.

"According to local legend, John Wolfskill judged the fertility of the soil by the height of the native grain, cutting back toward the creek whenever the grain no longer came up to the highest point on his horse's back," says historian Larkey, author of the book, *Winters: A Heritage of Horticulture, a Harmony of Purpose.* "That could explain why the land grant's northern boundary, now marked by Russell Boulevard, follows an irregular stair-step contour roughly parallel to Putah Creek."

John arrived at Putah Creek in mid-July 1842 and spent his first night in a tree with "bears, panthers and other friendly carnivores prowling and howling around his bedroom roosting place," as he would later tell historian Tom Gregory.

Apparently it was all part of the fun. John defended himself with his wits and his guns and set about settling the property he called "Rancho Rio de los Putos".

He built a shack out of mud and reeds and put livestock out to graze. He planted fig and olive trees, barley, corn, beans and grapevines, tending his crops with water he hauled by bucket from the creek.

The property stayed in William Wolfskill's name until 1849, when half of it was transferred to John. Legal issues ensued when California became part of the United States in 1850, but by 1854, William was finally able to transfer the entire ranch to John.

Smart grower with a big heart

John made several trips from his ranch to his brother's home in Los Angeles - and you think

the modern-day commute is tough! To get there, John would swim his horse across the Carquinez Straits. On one such trip, he returned driving a 96-head herd of cattle, a perfect number for a man whose family brand was "96".

He always returned with seeds and cuttings of new varieties of fruit, nuts and vines, including an Eastern shellbark hickory, pecans and a French Maderia nut. Once he brought back two date palm seeds, a male and a female, which gave birth to the two towering trees still gracing the Wolfskill ranch.

Over the half-century John lived in the Winters area, his concentration on different crops and products shifted, and he always seemed to be growing the right commodity at the right time. Before the Gold Rush, he focused on fruit, grains, vegetables and livestock so when miners were clamoring for fresh produce, he was there to sell it to them for a dollar a pound.

Dried beef was also in high demand, and people traveled for miles to partake of John's "jerky line" – the jerked beef he hung on a 50-foot rawhide rope stretched between two oak trees. Miners paid good money for the jerky, but John was also famous for sharing it with wayfarers in need.

As the gold-seeking mania subsided, folks settled in the bay and valley areas, providing a steady market for Wolfskill's goods. He understood the value of transportation, and would haul his produce to the boats and rail cars needed to disperse it to population centers.

How's this for treasure?

According to the U.S. Agricultural Census Schedule for 1850, Wolfskill's total assets were valued at $5,000. By 1870, the estimate was $190,000.

John's family was growing, as well. When William Knight, a former New Mexican trader who settled in Yolo County in 1843, was murdered at Knights Ferry in 1849, John Wolfskill came to the aid of his widow and her eight young children. According to Larkey, Carmelita Knight became John's common-law wife and remained so until her death in 1852. John raised their only child, Edward. In 1858, he married Susan Cooper and they had three daughters. They raised and educated an orphaned girl, as well.

One by one, John and William's other brothers and their families came to settle at Rancho Rio de los Putos – first Mathus, then Milton, then Satchel. John gave them land to cultivate, and orchards in the area grew.

Wolfskill grew oranges from cuttings he received from his brother's massive orange grove in southern California.

As other pioneers made their homes along Putah Creek, "Uncle John" (as he was known) was quick to welcome them with encouraging words and fruit-tree cuttings. He even loaned them tools. When locals had a cultivation question, they always turned to Uncle John, the original farm advisor.

John and his family built some lovely homes on the ranch over the years, increasingly nicer than his original tule hut. In 1864, he completed a two-story home of native stone, historians figure was quarried from hills east of Monticello Dam on Putah Creek. He had planted an avenue of olive trees in 1861 which provided a magnificent entrance to the mansion. John and Susan lived and raised their family there for 28 years before it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1892.

Daughter Frances Wolfskill Taylor took charge of building a replacement, a 17-room mansion she fash-

Woflskill planted two date palm seeds which gave birth to two towering trees still gracing the ranch.

ioned after the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. It had an interior courtyard and the "96" brand over the entrance. John lived in the house for five years before passing away in 1897 at the age of 93.

John was a prominent man with a fancy home but he was anything but pretentious. His friends were farmers and he was perfectly content grafting new varieties, experimenting with new forms of irrigation and pest control and reading farm journals. His idea of a special occasion was visiting farm exhibitions at state and county fairs and bringing home some new gadget.

A lasting legacy

Frances took over the property and operated it with the help of her second husband, Lawrence Wilson. When she died in 1934, she left 107 acres of her father's prime real estate – including the mansion and rows and rows of vines, fruit and nut trees – to the UC Davis Department of Pomology, now incorporated in the Department of Plant Sciences, for an experimental horticulture station. Drive 1.6 miles west of Winters on Putah Creek Road and you can see it, heralded by the original olive-trees entrance and a bronze plaque that reads:

In 1842 John R. Wolfskill arrived here laden with fruit seeds and cuttings. He was a true horticulturist and become the father of the fruit industry in this region. Mrs. Frances Wolfskill Taylor Wilson, his daughter, bequested 107.26 acres to the University of California for an experimental farm from this portion of Rancho Rio de los Putos. The University's research has since enriched the state's horticultural industry.

And indeed, it has. "The Wolfskill Experimental Orchards are a research treasure," says Professor Ted DeJong, a pomologist and the station's director. "Work there has resulted in the development and release of 55 new varieties - 29 strawberry, eight processing peach, seven cherry, five almond, three prune and three pistachio - as well as two almond-peach rootstocks."

Germplasm evaluation blocks for research and education have been conducted for 18 commodities – everything from apricot to almond to avocado. The orchards have been invaluable for plant breeding and environmental stress research, such as rain cracking

with cherries, and testing cultural practices and tree physiology, like nitrogen requirements for prune and peach trees.

In addition to the 107 acres, the Wolfskill family donated another 28 acres from the original land grant in 1953 and Masson Land Enterprises donated another 20 acres in 1985. Since 1980, the Wolfskill Experiment Orchards have also been home to a USDA-run National Clonal Germplasm Repository, which keeps alive several hundred varieties of stone-fruits, grapes, walnuts, pistachios, persimmons, walnuts, olives, pomegranate, fig and kiwi.

"None of this would have been possible without John Wolfskill," says Al Bonin, agricultural superintendent of the Wolfskill orchards since 1979. Al and his assistant Tony Cristler don't fight grizzly bears or panthers and they cover the terrain in a dusty Dodge pickup or an old Jeep, not on horseback. When they host fruit-tasting tours and picnics in the shady groves, they're for food-and-wine-industry magnates, not gold miners.

Agricultural Superintendent Al Bonin is proud to carry on the Wolfskill tradition.

And yet, Al and Tony say they think of John Reid Wolfskill every single day, as they drive past the date palm and olive trees he planted more than a century ago, for example, and witness all the horticultural advances Wolfskill's land and labor helped spawn.

"It just goes to show you," Al says, taking a break under the canopy of a pecan tree, "one guy really can make a difference."

Several sources were invaluable for compiling this history, including historian and author Joann Leach Larkey, the Vacaville Heritage Council and the Winters History Project and writers Kris Delaplane Conti and Brooks C. Sackett. A special thanks to the Winters History Project for helping organize the "Winters Horticultural Symposium: The Legacy of John Reid Wolfskill" held August 26, 2009, in Winters. The symposium not only shone light on the Wolfskill story, but also gathered together many members of the extended Wolfskill clan, several who had never met each other before. Among Wolfskill descendents is Richard Harris, retired faculty from the Department of Environmental Horticulture, who lives in Davis with his wife, Vera.

Predicting harvest just got easier

Calculating chill accumulation and predicting harvest timing for peaches, plums and nectarines just got a little easier thanks to some fine-tuning of the weather-related models on the Fruit & Nut Research and Information Center Web site *fruitsandnuts.ucdavis.edu.*

Among the most popular pages on the website, the weather-related models include the Dynamic Model, which calculates chill accumulation, and the Harvest Prediction Model which helps predict harvest timing for peaches, plums and nectarines. The models are used by people involved in crop management, including growers, advisors and researchers.

Significant changes were made to the Dynamic Model to fine-tune the output, correcting some drift observed in previous years. This task, initiated by Franz Niederholzer, orchard systems farm advisor in Sutter and Yuba Counties, was accomplished by Bryon Noel and Karl Krist, programmers with ANR Communications.

Recent additions to the Harvest Prediction Model include details regarding the calculation methods used in the model, the science behind the changes in development of the model and figures providing model details for specific fruits. These additions were initiated by Professor Ted DeJong with the Department of Plant Sciences and Katherine Jarvis-Shean, graduate student in Horticulture and Agronomy. Jarvis-Shean completed the project in September with the help of Noel and Janet Zalom, computer specialist with the Fruit & Nut Research and Information Center which is housed in the Department of Plant Sciences.