

Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan



John Beck: A Rancher with a Hard Luck Retirement

John Beck, his parents and three siblings left their Iowa farm in 1863, when John was 19 years old, and crossed the plains in a wagon train. By 1870 the family had arrived in Livermore. On June 1, 1873 John married Priscilla Simmons; they had four children who survived to adulthood. Priscilla and John had been schoolmates back in Iowa. After she came to California with her mother, according to the *Herald*, "Their friendship was renewed and ripened into love."

Livermore Avenue north of the town limits was first named Beck Road after John Beck, to whose property the road led. By the 1880 agricultural census, he owned 954 acres on which he raised 200 tons of hay, 300 bushels of barley, and 3,400 bushels of wheat. His ranch in the same year produced 300 pounds of butter and 200 dozen eggs. The *Livermore Herald* announced that he raised 130 tons of summer fallow wheat and a good crop of apples in 1881.

The early area newspapers often printed short items about roadmaster John Beck's grading local roads in many places from near the Olivina Vineyard all the way up to (Old) Altamont Road. The *Herald* reported that on March 30, 1882, he was working on Livermore Avenue, as well as on the Dublin grade, with a team of six men and 18 horses, a county grader, and a plow. His grandson Robert Beck told of his grandfather's having played a major part in the building of Mines Road. In 1898 John Beck completed the grading for a new road to the coal mining town of Tesla.

The first buildings of his ranch, later called the "Corner Ranch" because they lie at the intersection of North Livermore Avenue and Manning Road, still survive: two large barns, a granary, two rig sheds, and a cement

water tank. The original house, only 16 by 32 feet, is also here. His two youngest daughters, Edith and Olivetta, were both married on the steps of the little house in 1902 and 1905.

Shortly after the marriage of Olivetta, John Beck sold at auction on Saturday, October 14, 1905, his ranch equipment and road contractor's outfit: 140 cattle, 40 horses, farming implements, contracting tools, and household furniture. He told the *Livermore Echo* reporter that he intended to retire and take life easy in his old age.

Not many days later, his wife Priscilla choked on a bone while eating her lunch alone at the ranch. John found her unconscious and rushed her to Dr. Warner's office. Although taken to the hospital, she died of blood poisoning sustained from scratches she had made in her throat when she was trying to remove the obstruction.

About 1908 Beck sold his Corner Ranch property and built a fancier country home, "El Cayetano," half a mile up Morgan Territory Road. Two palm trees that graced the entrance to the house, a cistern, and two large barns remained at the site when we moved to Morgan Territory Road in 1980.

In December 1909 John Beck married Anna Wallace and gave her \$3,800 to help her mother and pay her mortgage. He soon discovered that she was already married and had five children, but no sick mother. They divorced about a year later.

John's eldest son, George L. Beck, had moved to Washington State with his wife and three young children. Several years later, they decided to travel by train to visit relatives and friends in Livermore. A sudden heavy snowfall trapped their train, the Spokane Limited with 40 passengers, as well as a westbound

transcontinental train, high in the Washington mountains on February 24, 1910. In the early morning of March 1, an avalanche swept both trains, along with 30 workmen attempting to free them, down the side of a mountain, killing 96 people—still the highest avalanche death toll in U.S. history. The young family is buried together at Roselawn Cemetery in Livermore.

John Beck broke one of his legs while in San Francisco in 1915. The break was severe enough to curtail his activities; he was still using a crutch two years later on a late November evening. He was alone and moving from one room to another, maneuvering with his crutch and a small glass oil lamp. The lamp tilted and the chimney fell off. It did not break as it struck the floor, and Beck attempted to recover it. He did not realize that he was holding the lamp at a dangerous angle until it exploded, scattering the burning oil about the room. Soon it spread to the walls.

Being lame, he could do nothing to extinguish the fire, but he made his way to the porch and shouted for help. His nearest neighbor hurried to the scene with his men. They worked hard to put out the fire, but it had gained too much headway under the stimulus of an oil stove and a wall lamp, which both burst and added fuel to the fire. All the contents of the house were burned except for one trunk. The loss was estimated at \$5,000; insurance covered less than half of that.

Several weeks later, a depressed John Beck journeyed to San Francisco, where he rented a hotel room and killed himself with potassium cyanide. He is buried beside Priscilla at Roselawn Cemetery.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)