

Pioneer legacy lives on at Vacaville ranch

By Barry Eberling

VACAVILLE — William Pleasants in 19th century Solano County shot grizzly bears, ran an oxen-powered grist mill and survived a powerful earthquake in the valley that still bears the family name.

Today, descendant Ethel Hoskins lives in Pleasants' 1891 Queen Anne Victorian on the old ranch. In 2006, she had Pleasants Ranch placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"My real drive is to save it for the future generations as a place where people can step back in time, take a deep breath and embrace the beauty that's here and the history that's here," Hoskins said.

Thirteen buildings on the ranch have historic recognition from the nation and state. They include the house, the bunk house, the wagon shed and the foreman's cottage. Hoskins also had a Solano Land Trust conservation easement placed on much of the 406-acre ranch on Pleasants Valley Road about seven miles north of Vacaville. That protects it from development. And she formed the Joyful Ranch nonprofit group to preserve and restore the ranch for decades to come, given that Hoskins has no heirs.

Hoskins even with these protections could renovate her house whenever she wants. She surrendered none of her private property rights by putting the building on the National Register of Historic Places. But, if she wants to keep her house on the register, she must follow certain rules. For example, she said, she couldn't replace the porch posts with ones in a modern style.

"I have to stay within the period," Hoskins said.

And she could not simply renovate the foreman's cottage if she wanted to retain the building's historical status. First, she had to submit papers to the state Office of Historic Preservation. Those papers have been tied up for eight months,



Ethel Hoskins stands in front of her 1891 Queen Anne Victorian built by William Pleasants and maintains the ranch in Pleasants Valley. Hoskins placed Pleasants Ranch on the National Register of Historic Places. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)

It all started with William Pleasants, who was born in Kentucky in 1834, grew up in Missouri and came to California by covered wagon with his father in 1849, the year of the Gold Rush. He and his father worked the mines by the Feather River before walking to Sacramento in 1850 and then continuing into Solano County. "As we were the first settlers and as the valley had no name, we gave it our own name, 'Pleasants,'" he wrote in the Jan. 28, 1882, edition of the Pacific Rural Press.

Solano County had yet to be tamed by pioneers. William Pleasants and his father saw the area before it became covered with farms, ranches and fledgling towns.

"This valley, now so famous as a fruit-growing district, was once the home of vast herds of wild animals, such as elk, deer, grizzly bears, California lions and wolves," Pleasants wrote in the Pacific Rural Press. "One afternoon, I saw 11 grizzly bear in two miles and within one mile of this valley.

"It is useless to say that we killed both deer and bear whenever we pleased. The largest grizzly bear we ever killed weighed when dressed 800 pounds." Then there were the difficulties of being a new settler in an area far from stores and sawmills.

"Virgin forests that had never, since

And he wrote in journals, recording his own history and that of the county. For example, he felt the jolt from Solano County's most devastating earthquake at 2:50 a.m. April 19, 1892. He felt the aftershock a few days later.

"My house swayed about three feet from west to east," Pleasants wrote. "The shock was preceded by a low rumbling noise in the mountains west of the valley, which quickly approached with a heavy shaking and upheaving."

His house survived. Many buildings in downtown Vacaville, Winters and Dixon crumbled. Witnesses described a mile-long fissure opening up in the ground near Allendale.

"Winters is living in tents," Pleasants wrote.

And he wrote about his daughter getting married and moving to Oregon, saying the sun had eclipsed and he almost wished himself dead. He never expected to see her again in this day before cars and freeways. "Yet I do not blame her for getting married and going off to do for herself with the one she loves," Pleasants wrote. "May God help her do right and live a true Christian life is the prayer of her old father." Her "old father" wrote this in 1889, when he was in his mid-50s. Pleasants survived his wife, remarried in 1901

she said.

Getting on the state and national lists took some work. Hoskins had a woman write a report that documented the ranch's history and called it a good example of a horticultural operation.

"She knew what language to use," Hoskins said.

What Hoskins gets from having the properties on the state and national historic lists is nothing to do with money. Rather, she talked of the peace of mind that comes from doing what she can to preserve part of the county's history, as well as a site bound up in her family's history for generations.

the world began, heard the sound of the ax had to be cleared away, buildings erected and the ground got in condition for cultivation," he wrote in his 1906 book, "Twice Across the Plains."

He traveled to Missouri in 1856 to get the rest of his family and returned to Pleasants Valley, surviving such challenges as American Indian attacks on the journey.

Pleasants was a rancher who built and ran a grist mill where his neighbors ground corn. He grew oranges and other fruit, which occasionally brought him into Winters. The Pacific Rural Press reported that he shipped 12,000 oranges in 1885.

and in 1904 became a father again. Pleasants died in 1919. His daughter from his last marriage had Hoskins in 1942, at age 37.

That means Hoskins is only two generations removed from Solano County's pioneer days. Now Hoskins is using National Register of Historic Places status for the ranch buildings to help keep the memory of those pioneer days alive.



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One of two carriages once owned by William Pleasants that are stored at the ranch he settled in the 1800s. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)



William Pleasants, right, stands in front of his 1891 Queen Anne Victorian that he built in the valley that now bears his name. (Courtesy Ethel Hoskins)



The old foreman's cottage still stands on Pleasants Ranch, which has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)



The journal of William Pleasants from May 14, 1877, with his reading glasses. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)



The old wagon shed, now used as a garage on Pleasants Ranch, has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)



Ethel Hoskins pictured in the living room of her 1891 Queen Anne Victorian built by William Pleasants. (Brad Zweerink/Daily Republic)