

Pleasants Valley Still Home

Living With History

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Ethel Hoskins never wanted to move away from home, so she never did. Hoskins is 66 and is the last of her line. Never married, she left temporarily for a college education. Then she came back home to live with her parents and stay on in a house that she still loves and cares for - a house she hopes will, with a great deal of help, live on without her.



Joel Rosenbaum!
 Ethel Hoskins studies the Journals kept by her grandfather, William Pleasants, who settled Pleasants Valley.

The mansion is called Joyful Ranch (a name inspired by Scripture). It's a century-old Queen Anne Victorian off Pleasants Valley Road, named after her grandfather, William Pleasants.

"There was no 'aha light bulb' moment about deciding to stay here," she says about her decision to remain on the approximately 400 acres of property. "No, the light never came on - it was always on."

Inside her home, history cuddles up to the present day. A flat-screen TV takes its place comfortably in the kitchen near a table where, through the years, many generations of workmen would gather after being summoned by the ranch's bell, which is still securely housed in its belfry. The men would eat their three squares as a welcome respite from the hard work of pruning fruit trees or herding cattle. Past the kitchen, in a nearby storage area, the family Victor Victrola, which Hoskins believes would probably still work if put back together, is stacked near a well-worn stuffed teddy bear that she won at a carnival 56 years ago.

Dusty chandeliers, brand new in the early days of electrical wiring at the ranch, sit grandly, if a bit reproachfully, on a top storage shelf. Her childhood scooter hauntingly waits near the back door. She points out all these historical treasures as matter-of-factly as she shows her latest efforts at wallpapering the downstairs bedrooms. "Love the flowers," she says. "But, halfway through, I saw that I had papered them upside down - oh, well." Hoskins' grandfather came to California from Missouri by wagon train. He and his father were part of the rush for gold in California - but that's not how they ultimately made their fortune. They found their wealth in a lush area near Winters and, what was then called Davisville (now, of course, Davis). Realizing more abundance in the antelope, geese and bears and the rich fertility of the land than in the stubbornly elusive gold, William and his father decided to settle.

They named their 4,000 acres after themselves: Pleasants Valley.

William fell in love with a fellow passenger on his long, hard journey to the Golden State, married and had eight children. He used the little gold he had managed to mine for land, fruit trees and cattle. The game he loved to hunt for was sold to the miners, who prized fresh food and paid a good price for it. In the end, the family's greatest profits came from the fruit that he planted. History notes that he first realized the potential of California fruit when he became very ill in his early days in California and felt restored by eating figs.

After the death of his first wife, William Pleasants, at 69, married a woman in her 20s. Their daughter, Ruth Pleasants Hoskins, had two daughters - Jean, and, many years later, Ethel.

"I am not sure I was totally expected," she says, with a slight wink.

Throughout the house, family pictures silently but vividly tell the stories of long-vanished parties, musical recitals and formal sittings for photographers. Among them, an ancient, sober-as-a-judge portrait, assertively claiming its post near the master bedroom. It's a photograph of Hoskins' Uncle Harvey, who is mainly remembered for a dramatic injury.

"Indians shot in his direction, and big, honkin' bullets passed through one man's body and got my uncle in the backside. He couldn't sit down for a week. His body was re-interred when the cemetery near Pleasants Valley School was moved to Winters. When he was exhumed from the old cemetery, they handed me the bullets that were never surgically removed. I've put those bullets in a safe." And if there are any gaps in what the photos reveal, there are always the written historical accounts - and she doesn't have to go far for them.

"I have all my grandfather's journals," says Hoskins, nimbly climbing the stairs, lightly touching the banister she loved to slide down as a child. "In one entry he wrote: 'Had three Chinese laborers prune the apricot tree this morning. Sent Tom to town for supplies. Vacaville burned down this afternoon. Will go bear hunting tonight.'"

She keeps some of William's journals in the upper bedroom, one open at the desk where he worked. It was written with a pencil in careful cursive. Daily weather conditions, visitors who traveled along the nearby road and detailed lists of needed supplies merited brief mentions in his entries.

Most of Hoskins' career was spent teaching. Working at Elm School, she retired after 38 years and later stayed at home to care for her elderly parents. Wanderlust never entered her mind.

"Why would I want to leave here and live in the 'concrete jungle?' she asks rhetorically. "Who in their right mind would ever want to find any other place to be?"

While she clearly enjoys telling her stories, Hoskins knows that she won't be around forever to share them. That is why, after the death of her older sister and her realization of the passing of time, she began a crusade for Joyful Ranch to be an enduring part of Solano County history. It is now The Joyful Ranch Foundation. The foundation's efforts to preserve the property include a conservation easement of 366 acres. In addition, work is under way to restore 13 buildings on the ranch (one is the barn which still houses Williams' two tattered horse buggies and parts of his grist mill). Her partners are Solano Land Trust, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, among other agencies and organizations which will play different and important roles in the future of the ranch.

Parts of the foundation's efforts involve offering group motivational meetings, guided walks, classroom field trips and even weddings so that thousands can see and share in the beauty of the ranch. While she wanders the acreage with her trusty shovel in her hands (just in case she meets a frisky rattlesnake), Hoskins ponders the future.

"When the time comes for me to leave here, I'm not sure my personal things should be removed or left as part of history," she says. "It's hard to know where Ethel, me, begins and ends and where my grandparents, mother, dad and sister do. I guess, in the end, we're all a part of this place."