

Every year on Founders Day (1st Saturday in September) we select a topic related to the history of Elk Grove to share with the public. In the third year, Rhoads School Director Roberta Tanner decided to explain the history of transportation in the beginnings of our community. Here is a fascinating look into what she shared...

As I teach at Rhoads School and give tours at the museum, the most common comment I hear about living in pioneer times is how difficult life would be without modern plumbing and bathrooms. And I have to agree with that sentiment.

People will go on and on about all the virtues of pioneer life--slower lifestyle, being more in tune with nature and neighbors, and living off the land-- as sadly lost to our day. Even when it comes to electronics and our dependence on cell phones and computers, many people say they would be willing to give them up for the sake of the simpler pioneer life, if not for that pesky plumbing issue.

But I think there's another aspect of pioneer living that most people haven't considered, equally difficult to live without—modern transportation. I have to say, I enjoy using my frequent flier miles to visit family in far away places!

Modern transportation is taken for granted – as we give no thought to going from Elk Grove to Sacramento several times even in one day. In 1872, when Rhoads School was being rebuilt after the first one burned to the ground, it was a significant outlay of time and labor to make that trip. A load of lumber could be hauled from Sacramento in a day by starting before dawn and arriving home after dark. With a good team the trip took a minimum of 4 hours one way. It took them 5 trips.

Virtually all of the modes of transportation that have changed our way of life were introduced within the lifetime of men and women that may not be still living; but that we have known in our lifetimes. My grandmother told of riding in an ox-pulled wagon from Utah to Arizona to visit family when she was a teenager and then marveled at the fact she was able to fly to Oregon 50 years later to see my Dad graduate from dental school. Quite a difference in one life span!

The automobile, truck, bus, airplane and motorboat are less than 120 years old. Today we think nothing of driving 40 miles on a family expedition or 1,000 miles on a summer vacation. But in grandfather's day, moving about was a difficult, uncertain and rare undertaking.

So how did people get to this area? Well, many by ox-drawn wagon.

Let me tell you about some of our founding families:

Martin Murphy's family came from Ireland through Quebec and St. Joseph in 1844. They were part of the first successful crossing of the Sierra Nevada Mountains by wagon train. Murphy helped Governor Micheltoreno so the governor made him a Mexican citizen, which was a requirement of land ownership, and let him buy land on the Cosumnes River, south of Sheldon's grant at Highway 99 and Grantline. He built a horse corral and started to farm.

Mrs. Murphy held school for the children around her home in 1846. It was one of Elk Grove's first schools. Their ranch, called Murphy's Corral played a part in the Bear Flag Revolt.

The Rhoads family, one of the next successful wagon trains to cross the Sierras came in 1846 and helped settle the Sloughhouse area with Jared Sheldon and William Daylor, as the Rhoads daughters married these pioneers.

John and Daniel Rhoads were part of the rescue of the Donner Party, an **unsuccessful** wagon crossing.

In 1853, after losing her husband, Euphemia Foulks joined a wagon train led by her brother and brought her 5 children to Elk Grove. They lived in the wagon for a year while they built their house. You can see the replica of the wagon and the restored house on the tours given later.

It took 4- 6 months to traverse the plains. The overland trail was **walked** by those pioneers as space in the wagon was needed for household goods and food. There were usually animals to be herded as well.

Another means of coming west was by ship. The Ship Brooklyn, coming from New York, landed in 1846 in now San Francisco. Because they had no weight restrictions, like one had with an ox-drawn wagon, they were able to bring 179 books and a printing press. They started the first library in California, the first bank, and the first newspaper which ultimately sent the news of the gold discovery back east.

One of our other founding families also came by boat but in a different way. The Kerr brothers, George and Joseph, arrived in 1852. They came from Pennsylvania via the Isthmus of Panama. People would make their way, either by wagon or ship to Panama, walk across the 30 or so miles and wait for another ship coming north to pick them up and drop them off in San Francisco. There were actually quite a few people that came to California that way. It saved time, and, except for the diseases they encountered in Panama, it was a safer way to travel. The Kerrs owned the land that comprises just about all of Downtown Elk Grove today and Joseph Kerr donated the land on which the first

union free high school in the state of California was built in 1893. That is now the site of Joseph Kerr Middle School.

There were also stage coaches, more like public transit. And families often owned buggies, much smaller and nicer conveyances than a wagon which became work vehicles.

One of the earliest roads was the Monterey Trail. It paralleled the Sacramento River and ran from Sutter's Fort to Monterey, the capital of Mexican California. However, the entire area out by Franklin flooded in the winter, so a secondary, higher road was built to the east and most travelers took the higher ground for their route. In the gold days, these two trails became known as the Lower and Upper Stockton Roads. Today they are Franklin Boulevard and Highway 99.

Those traveling the Monterey Trail by stage coach would stop at houses built along the way, about 18 miles apart or one day's journey, for refreshment for themselves as well as their horses. Just such a house was built very close to this spot, in fact right about 100 feet west, in the middle of south-bound 99. It was built in 1850 by James Hall and he named it the Elk Grove House. There must have been a lot of traffic because 3 years later, James Buckner built a hotel a mile north to compete with Hall's establishment. Buckner may have been the one who put the road through to Grantline Road (later called Main Street and now Elk Grove Boulevard) to catch the traffic of the gold mines.

Buckner and others built an entire town at that spot. They had a Post Office, a saloon, a tin shop, blacksmith shop, Masonic Hall and cemetery. It was a bustling town until an event occurred in 1868 that sealed the fate of Old Elk Grove. And I quote Elizabeth Pinkerton, "In that year, the Central Pacific Railroad finished its line from Sacramento to Stockton and on to San Francisco. Unfortunately, whether by design or by neglect, the shiny new tracks missed the little settlement of Elk Grove at the intersection of today's Elk Grove Boulevard and Highway 99. The railroad didn't miss Elk Grove by much, but a mile is a mile, and there was no way that having tracks a mile away was going to make a town the picture of prosperity. The little town struggled to survive and serve the growing agricultural community, but some folks had visions of the prosperity that could occur if the town were closer to the railroad. In 1876, the town of Elk Grove began to move to the new railroad tracks." Nothing is left of that Old Elk Grove town except the cemetery, though a lot of businesses have grown there again.

The new railroad line opened up all sorts of possibilities. Sacramento's population spilled over its city limits into several suburban communities made possible by smaller streetcars running on a track system. The first of these were simply railways, with all of the smoke and noise of the steam locomotive, or they were elaborate carriage wagons pulled by horses and mules. A lot of people complained about the noise and the danger. After all, the cars were careening down the streets at break-neck speeds of 12-15 miles per hour.

The railroad had other impacts on society. Farming could be done on a much larger scale because produce could be shipped to a much larger market.

When the Central Pacific Railroad came through Elk Grove in 1868, farmers were able to turn their grain fields into orchards and vineyards.

Just east of Bradshaw Road, the California Vineyard Company raised hundreds of acres of grapes and shipped them out by the California Traction Line Railroad. The company had 1400 acres in Tokay grapes in 1912 and was said to be the largest vineyard in the world. The road that led to the company is known today as Calvine Road, from the name of the company— California Vineyard-- that was too long to fit on the street sign.

Most families had their own cows for milk and beef. But when the railroads came through the Cosumnes River area, small farm dairies and chicken ranches developed throughout the south county. The California Traction Line was called the “Milk Train” because it carried fresh milk and eggs to the growing cities of Sacramento and Stockton. Those rail lines still exist today, though they are not in use.

And the town of Florin, though established in 1852 when world-renowned horticulturist James Rutter and E.B. Crocker, founder of the Crocker Art Museum, purchased 240 acres there, only became official in 1875 when the railroad came through. Rutter planted fruit trees, experimented with grapes and seedlings, and started a winery. He was the first to plant Tokay wine grapes in California. The Frasinetti winery, established in 1897, is the oldest winery in the region. Judge Crocker is the one who gave Florin its name. The fields were covered with wildflowers, making it appropriate for the place to be named after the Latin word for flower, flora. The founders could not have known that Florin would become the strawberry capital of the world.

The first trainload of strawberries from California was shipped from Florin in 1893. The city’s peak record season of 1941 showed 133 carloads of very perishable strawberries shipped by rail and hundreds of truckloads driven nightly to the Bay Area, Northern California and also Nevada. That same year, the grape growers shipped 130 carloads of Flame Tokay grapes to eastern markets.

Railroads didn’t change some occupations, however.

Dr. James McKee was known as a horse and buggy doctor, traveling in all kinds of weather at all hours. He used a single buggy drawn in summer by one horse and in winter, when the country roads were deep in mud, drawn by two horses, with the top down. He often had to stand to drive, fighting wind, weather, and mud. Patients hung lanterns on gate posts on stormy nights to guide him.

Dr. Hugh Beattie was also a horse and buggy doctor until the automobile came into use.

Dr. Fred Wildanger drove a little open car in all kinds of weather and never let anything delay him in reaching a patient if he could help it. On one occasion when a train blocked the Main Street (sometimes this caused a delay of quite a long period), Dr. Wildanger looked both ways then just took off along the track until he passed the end of the train, went up and over the track and back down the other side to Main Street, and went merrily on his way.

The original Central Pacific Railroad that ran through the middle of Elk Grove became the Southern Pacific and then the Union Pacific. But by the 1970s, it was apparent that passenger service would no longer be a part of the offerings available for those who wished to travel to and from Elk Grove. The railroad depot on the southeast side of the tracks was closed. We still have the thrill of the trains coming through, just no passenger service.

Automobiles changed the lives of everyone in Elk Grove just as they did across the nation. The local livery stable got rid of its horses and used the new gasoline-powered vehicles to pull the wagons.

Blacksmith shops became machine shops turned garages. Men learned new skills to keep the cars running.

Big changes began to occur in Elk Grove in the 1900s when automobiles became available. A trip to Sacramento by horse-and-buggy took all day, but with an automobile, it was just a few hours. The partnership of Henry L. Ehrhardt and George Rhoads changed it all. They created the first automobile dealership in Elk Grove in 1919, the Ford Model T Agency.

A huge crowd gathered for the grand opening. One of the first buyers of a Model T was the town doctor, who quickly recognized how he could improve his services for farm families.

Matt and Bill Batey came to Elk Grove from England in 1919 and set up a pump and machine repair shop on Main Street. Other family members joined them, and their brother Bob entered the business. The Bateys recognized the machine of the future and joined the growing automobile market. Batey Chevrolet was a premier family-owned business until almost the end of the 20th century.

The needs of the local farmers were quickly addressed by the automobile dealerships in the 1920s as they added tractors to their lines of merchandise. The next step was to offer tractor schools so that farmers could learn how to operate the new machines. Classes were held in the sales room and the students practiced out in the fields.

Not much has changed since then except we've become much more specialized. I doubt you'll find a tractor anywhere at the Elk Grove Auto Mall, let alone classes on how to work it.

And now we have fire engines and other emergency vehicles to ensure there are no disasters like the Fire of 1892 which nearly ended our lovely town of Elk Grove. Sparks from a passing train ignited dry grass along the tracks and all the wood buildings built up around the depot burned. The men tried to put it out by lining up and passing buckets of water to throw on it, but the fire was too big. Before the Railroad Depot burned the agent telegraphed to Sacramento for help.

The railroad sent a car with firefighting equipment and they put the fire out and saved the hotel building where Bob's Bar is now. The people didn't want their town to burn again, so they started the Elk Grove Volunteer fire Department. They bought a fire bell and a hose cart and practiced putting out fires. They also started a water district. Today we are grateful for modern fire trucks and ambulances and especially for our first responders who work them.

Roads have improved in that we have many more of them and they're paved. And they are connected by bridges that cross the waterways.

These roads would have helped William Robinson Grimshaw as he carried a message from Sutter's Fort to a surveyor in Stockton in spring of 1849. It was necessary for the surveyor to be present at the settlement of a partnership. There was no method of communicating with him except by special messenger and that messenger would be Grimshaw. He gives one of the earliest and most detailed descriptions of the landscape as he tells of his journey.

I'll quote from his account:

[I went]" With some reluctance, - for the streams I had to pass were all 'bank full" ... I was furnished with two saddle horses, that being the only means of travelling, and a pair of blankets, without which a man would no more have thought of making a journey than without his boots or hat—and started riding one horse & leading the other. My road as far as French Camp (beyond Stockton) was the old "trail" from Monterey to Sutter's Fort – now called the upper Stockton road."

He had to cross 4 rivers in 3 days:

Once on a raft made of tule bound together, once in a canoe, once by balancing on a fallen tree that spanned a very full Dry Creek, all of these while the horses swam across. It wasn't always easy to round up the horses once on the other side. The last stream was the Calaveras. He said, "Here was no tule boat, no canoe, no log. According to previous instruction I loosed the cinch or girth of my saddle, placed my watch in my hat and plunged into the stream riding one horse and leading the other; taking great care not to let my horse be carried below the "coming out place". The water came half way between

waist & shoulder. Emerging from the creek I had to ride in my wet clothes on a chilly afternoon six miles to Stockton.” After 3 days of traveling this way, he was so stiff and sore he could hardly get out of his saddle. That night during a storm, one of the horses broke his tether and ran away. Grimshaw didn’t object when the surveyor offered him a sailboat ride home via San Francisco which took about a week.

It seems the first part of his trip was much more pleasant.

“The first thing to excite the wonder of the traveler was the vast number of wild **fowl**. It is impossible to give an idea of the quantity of these. One flock of ducks would cover acres of ground and would appear to be numbered by millions. As the horses passed along the road the geese would move out of the way from 10 to 20 feet on each side and it seemed to be impossible to realize that they were not tame. Herds of antelope were always in sight; so were numbers of the prowling coyote.”

Means of transportation may have changed but it seems traffic on Highway 99 has always been there!

I hope you will stay and enjoy all the activities and tours that are planned. Come and help me with the laundry later, if you’d like!

I’d like to leave you with 3 thoughts:

As you drive away today, in your dust-free, full-suspension, air conditioned car, I hope you’ll stop for just a moment and appreciate the ease with which you travel, carting people, groceries or a load of bricks. Be kind to your ride. Thank it for not running away from you. Maybe pat its nose, give it an extra carrot. As I tell by students at Rhoads School: Feed and water your horse first. If you don’t take care of your horse, it can’t take care of you.

Second, enjoy the smooth, for the most part, roads and many bridges that make traveling in our area so very convenient.

And third, as my husband would say, “Next time you’re in a traffic jam, like William Grimshaw, with seemingly thousands of *birdbrains* blocking your way...Don’t be tempted to use any *foul* language!”

Thank you for coming today. There are lots of activities for those of all ages. There are tours through our museum, as well as Rhoads School just down the street. And if you have never seen the research center in the basement, you should check it out!

Thank you!