

Claude Chana - pioneer fruit culturist

Excerpts from 1882 Thompson and West History of Placer County - page 239

To the emigration of 1846, which that year was considerable from the Western States to the Pacific Coast, does Placer County owe the presence of one of its earliest settlers; its pioneer fruit culturist; one among the first to till the soil, as well as the primal digger after gold within its borders, in the person of Claude Chana, born in France in 1811, who now lives at Wheatland, Yuba County. In the spring of 1846 a company to which Mr. Chana belonged started from St. Joseph, Missouri, for the then little known country of California, with a train of wagons drawn by oxen. At Weber Canyon, Utah, this train overtook and for several days kept company with the unfortunate Donner party. The company with which Chana traveled passed the Donner company, and after the usual vicissitudes attendant upon such journeys, at length reached the Truckee River, up which they traveled, crossed the summit of the Sierra, struck the head of the Greenhorn branch of Bear River, descended Steep Hollow by dragging fallen trees behind their wagons, proceeded down the old trail to the head of Wolf Creek; . . . to Johnson's ranch - the first settlement they had seen in the country - on the north bank of Bear River, where there was then an adobe house and some pretension toward cultivation. This was in October, and about two weeks before the occurrence of the storm which drove the Donner party, who were following, into winter quarters and prevented their further advance across the mountains.

When the company of which Chana was a member reached the head of Wolf Creek, there was no running water - only holes in the bed of the creek in which it was found standing. Previous to arriving here, no trouble had been made by Indians since crossing the summit; but here, all the night through, an infernal din was kept up in imitation of the cries of coyotes. To some of the more experienced of the men, these sounds had a significant effect; they were wakeful and prepared for an attack. Daylight disclosed the fact that some of their cattle had been shot with arrows, while others had been driven off over a trail leading toward Grass Valley.

On the southern side of Bear River nearly opposite Johnson's ranch, was also an adobe house owned by Theodore Sigard, a Frenchman who had settled there in 1845 and claimed a tract of land under a grant from the Mexican Government issued in 1844. Sigard was undoubtedly the first white settler in the territory now embraced within the limits of Placer County. Both he and Johnson had put in and gathered small crops of wheat in 1845. Johnson had acquired his title to the grant he occupied from General Sutter, who as administrator of the estate of the original grantee who has been killed, had sold the land at public sale. Sigard. . . had traveled extensively . . . and settled in California in 1839.

As soon as Chana learned . . . that the ranch across the river was owned by a Frenchman, he very naturally went there, and being well received made it his home and worked upon the place. Some of the company who came with him also crossed the stream and camped on the Sigard ranch. Among these were a family with children. Sigard and Chana noticed that among some dainties which the parents had given their children, were a few dried peaches, unpeeled and unpitted -and that the pits had been thrown away. This suggested the possibility that the rich bottom land of Bear River might be adapted to the growth of the peach tree. Thereupon, the two Frenchmen carefully gathered all the peach stones they could find and in November, 1846, planted them. While doing this Chana bethought that among his effects were a few almonds, and that if peaches would grow, almonds also might flourish. The day previous to settling out from St; Joseph, friends of the party about to leave for the unknown West had given a grand dinner, and after enjoying which, Chana, as he rose from the table, picked up a handful of almonds, and had sacredly kept them as a souvenir of the occasion. These were the nuts he now thought of, brought forth from their safe repository and this November day, in the year 1846, with the peach-pits, they were planted upon Sigard's ranch.

(In the spring of 1847, Claude Chana went to work at Sutter's Fort and afterwards came the gold discovery, and Chana's mining in Auburn ravine and on the Yuba where he made a fortune and then returned to Bear River).

The peach pits and almonds that had been planted in 1846, as also some apple and pear seeds, plum pits and 200 grape cuttings which had been obtained from the Mission San Jose in 1848 and planted, were growing finely and bade fair to be productive; while vegetables of all sorts grew rankly upon the rich loamy Bear River bottom lands. . . . Sigard would sell and Chana bought the grant, paying \$6,000 in gold. . . .the new owner began extensive improvements, and but a few years elapsed before the fruit grown upon it found way to the markets and yielded no little revenue. (See Book section for information on how to purchase this "History of Placer County" for the rest of this story and others documenting the development of the West and Placer County).