

VALLEY FORD

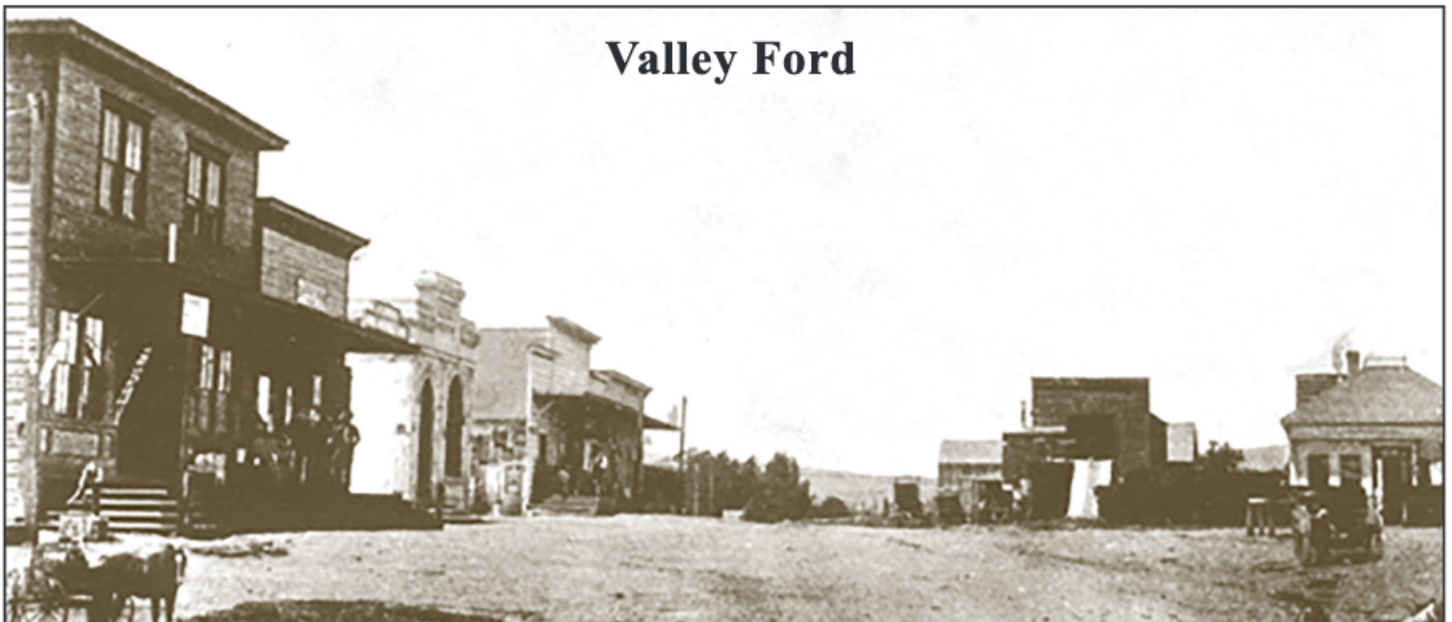
Highway 1, Valley Ford California

by Susan Teel - 2015

The town of Valley Ford is situated on the Estero Americano, four miles from its mouth. The old Spanish and Indian trail leading from the interior ranchos to Tomales Bay and the coast crossed the Estero. Hence, the name which was given to the farm and subsequently the town. At the point the trail forked and the one which led up to the valley, was the route travelled from Bodega Rancho to Sausalito. The Indians in the back country journeyed on this trail to the coast at Tomales Bay a few times a year for the purpose of feasting on shell fish and gathering shells to exchange goods. After 1857, the Coast Miwok ceased these travels.

Stephen L. Fowler and James E. Fowler arrived in San Francisco in May, 1849. After many hardships, chance brought them to Big Valley, better known as the valley of the Estero Americano, then an unfenced wilderness. They settled where the trail crossed the Estero and purchased F.G. Blume's six hundred and forty acres of land lying between the Ebabias Creek and the Estero. In July, they built a house two hundred yards from the ford. Whitehead Fowler came to Valley Ford in 1852. In May, 1854, Stephen C. Fowler and his wife, the parents of Stephen, James and Whitehead Fowler, arrived with their other three sons, John H., Benjamin and Nathaniel Fowler. Mrs. Fowler was the first female resident of the town. The Fowlers were joined by Thomas Smith who had been engaged in running a saw mill. He had purchased land and had planted potatoes. In 1856, Thomas was running a grist mill with horses, and then two years later, a steam engine and the mill soon became famous for the quality of its flour.

In the fall of 1861, Daniel Hall opened a blacksmith shop, John H. Fowler opened a general merchandise business, a bridge was built across the creek and James E. Fowler opened a lumber yard. In 1863 a Methodist Church was built and in 1864, the Valley Ford Hotel was built by J.N. Rien. By the summer of 1876, the North Pacific Coast Railroad Company extended their tracks through the town and built a depot. The travel time from Valley Ford to San Francisco was now four hours, compared to hauling goods 18 miles to Petaluma, and then to San Francisco.



VALLEY FORD

Valley Ford is probably best known for the controversial and famous building of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's, "Running Fence". The "Fence", completed on September 10, 1976, ran smack through Valley Ford and dominated landscape in Marin and Sonoma counties. The "Fence" crossed 14 roads and the private property of 59 ranchers to reach the Pacific Ocean near Bodega Bay. The required environmental impact report for the piece was 450 pages long. It brought a mixture of international journalists, environmental protesters, passionate art lovers and curious gawkers. The fence was 24.5 miles long and was 18 feet high. It was composed of 2,050 panels of white nylon fabric hung from steel cables by means of 350,000 hooks. It was removed 14 days later, leaving no visible trace.



Today, Valley Ford still hosts the Valley Ford Hotel, now known for the Rocker Oysterfeller's Restaurant on the first floor and for the seven pet-friendly rooms on the second floor. Dinucci's Restaurant still stands and serves family style Italian and seafood dinners. This Restaurant originally served passengers riding the North Coast Pacific Railroad. There is also the Valley Ford Market, a family-owned business and a farmers and ranchers grocery, and the Estero Café which serves local, organic produce and meats, typically from within a five to ten mile radius.



In 2015, the Valley Ford Wool Mercantile and Wool Mill processed local California wool that has been raised a short distance from the Mill. It specialized in custom wool production for bedding, outerwear, cushions stuffing or custom fabrics and wool felting materials for local fiber artists. It provided educational tours and workshops on the benefit of natural wool products, felting, spinning, weaving and knitting. The Mill processes fibers from Navajo Churro, Shetland, Alpaca, Llama and Angora, to name a few. The Mercantile sold eco and natural clothing, organic bedding, local cheeses, organic foods and jewelry. On May 16-17, 2015, there was the second Valley Ford Wool Festival that included demonstrations on sheep shearing, wool grading, needle felting, and music and food. ■

