

Historic Albert Church Home

By Phil Pezzaglia Photo from the Rio Vista Museum

The fine elegant ranch style Victorian home, originally owned by Albert Colby Church, is located two miles outside of Rio Vista on Montezuma Hills Road. Many old timers refer to the home as the "Perry Anderson Ranch." However, the Anderson family did not own the property until 1902.

Albert Colby Church was born in 1842 and spent his formative years in Michigan. His wife, Sarah Margaret Smith, was also a native of Michigan. She was born in October 1848 in Waterford, Oakland County. The couple met in Michigan and after marrying, made their way across the plains to California in a "prairie schooner." A "prairie schooner" was a half-sized version of the commonly used "Conestoga wagon."

Upon arriving in California, Albert and Sarah settled in Dixon for approximately five years. During this time Albert began to accumulate extensive farming interests near Willows and in the Montezuma Hills. The couple eventually relocated to the Montezuma Hills and set up a home on some of their land.

In the early years Albert partnered with James Hamilton, "Dobe Jim" as he was known to many, to avoid confusion with the other James Hamilton living in the area at the time. The partnership produced the firm of Church & Hamilton. L. L. Palmer's published a "Historical Sketch of Rio Vista, Cal. and Reminiscent Sketches - Forty Years Ago" containing a very detailed account of Rio Vista in the 1870's. His description regarding Albert Church was as follows: "I do not recall the exact location of the following people but they all lived out in the heart of the Montezuma Hills somewhere. First comes the firm of Church & Hamilton. Albert C. Church was one of the best business men in that section and I recall him with pleasure. He and James Hamilton were certainly a great success at wheat growing in those early days when the ground yielded to the full." Early on, Albert became a member of Rio Vista Lodge No. 208, Free and Accepted Mason and by 1882 he had reached the rank of Master Mason.

Besides farming, Albert found time to raise a family with his wife Sarah. The couple had six children: Emery Ephraim (1871-1941); Mark Israel (1873-1937); Louis Henry (1876-1927); Harriet Marie (1878-1935); Jessie C. (1879-1893); Smith Colvin (1883-1934); and Albert Colby (1887-1908).

In 1891, the family had expanded enough that it was the right time to erect a larger home to make life a little more comfortable for the family of eight. Albert enlisted the services of Weston Campbell, a local builder to erect a fine Victorian style two-story ranch home located approximately two miles outside of Rio Vista in the Montezuma Hills. The entire community watched in anticipation as the construction of the two-story Victorian ensued.

On the evening of September 14, 1891, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Church entertained a large housewarming party, even though their home was not to be completely finished for another six weeks. Approximately 150 people arrived

at the new home on the hill to attend an event that started around 9:00 p.m. and lasted until dawn the following morning. The guest list that evening read like a who's who of the area: Stern, Pressley, Dozier, Emigh, Paulson, Elliot, Anderson, Mayhood, Offerman, Fraser, Allendar, Lauritzen, Christianson and Fallman, to name a few. Many of these names probably sound familiar; some of the families still reside in the area while others are namesakes in the annals

of Rio Vista's history. The party was one that was long remembered in the community.

The finishing touches on the stately hill-top home were finally completed the first week of November 1891.

In February 1892 a large gathering took place to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of Albert Colby Church. Friends and relatives from different parts of the state were invited to the celebration. In April 1892 a large

surprise party was held for the eldest son, Emery. As with the house warming, this celebration saw over fifty guests having dinner at midnight and then dancing to the music of the River View Orchestra until past 3:00 a.m. The most splendid event held in the home was the wedding ceremony of Albert and Sarah's daughter, Hattie, to James L. Emigh. Once again the large home was the destination for more than one hundred guests to share in the nuptials between members of two pioneer families. With so many festive events taking place at the home, it became one of the most well known homes in the Montezuma Hills.

Albert Colby Church passed away in 1898. His wife, Sarah, and sons, Mark and Emery, continued to operate the ranch. Unfortunately there were some losses felt over the next four years. The first was the loss of one of the large barns due to a fire. Shortly thereafter a new barn was erected on the very same spot. Unfortunately for the Church family, a few years later another of their barns was destroyed by flames. On Saturday, November 22, 1902, a fire broke out in the building used as a blacksmith, tool and wagon shed across the road from the residence and the large barn. As the north wind continued to fuel the flames and send sparks flying, all efforts were concentrated on keeping the flames from attacking other buildings on the property. Luckily the one barn was all that was lost and not a single flame touched the fine Victorian home. However the building that did burn, contained all of the wagons, buggies, farm implements and tools, totaling approximately \$3,000.00. Unfortunately the insurance policy expired only five days previous.

Four years after the death of Albert, his widow Sarah decided to sell the ranch to Perry Anderson in 1902. This is the reason why many old timers refer to the home as the "Perry Anderson Ranch." By 1899 Anderson owned 700 acres of ranch land and with the purchase of the Church property gained an additional 330 acres. Perry and Anna Anderson raised 13 children in the home. The home remained an Anderson family home until 1962 and then became a rental property until 1999, when it was sold to the present owners, Al and Jeannie (McCormack) Medvitz.

