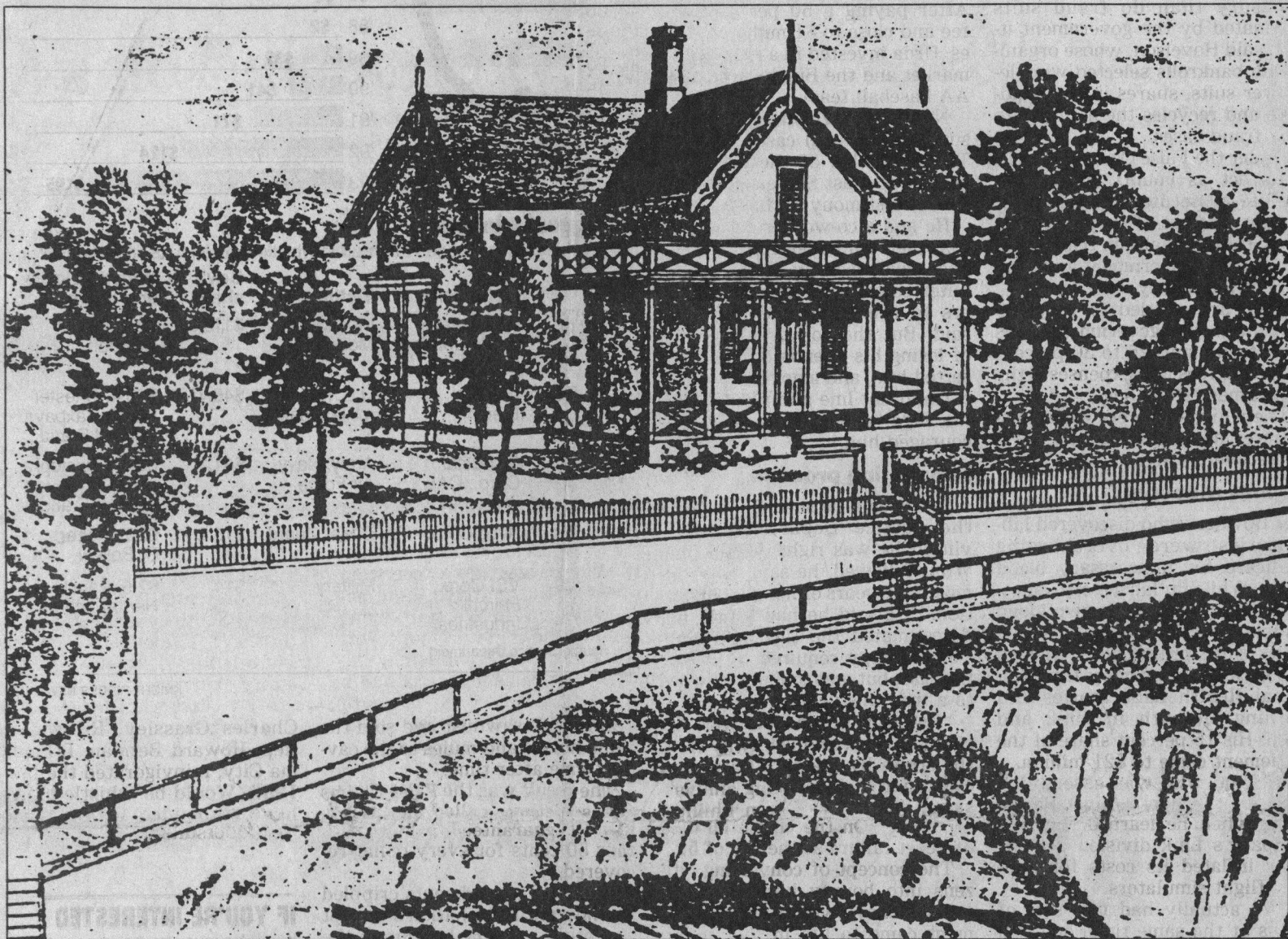


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The saga of the 'Barefoot Pioneer'



ROSS GIBSON COLLECTION

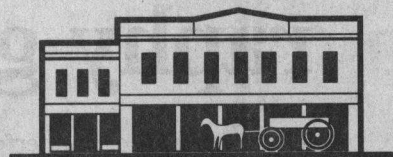
Elihu Anthony brought ex-slave Dave Boffman into this home on River Street in Santa Cruz when Boffman had nowhere else to go.

Injustice and weather robbed ex-slave of wealth

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

Ex-slave Dave Boffman never owned a pair of shoes in his life, traveling 2,000 miles across the plains as the "Barefoot Pioneer."

His Vine Hill homestead of 36 years was at the end of Branciforte Drive. And his story was brought to light by Phil Reader, whose book on black heritage in Santa Cruz County is due for publication this August.



OUT OF THE PAST

In 1851, Newton Baughman of Kentucky sold three of Boffman's six children to finance his jour-

See **PIONEER**, Page 4B



Sheriff John T. Porter
Cheated former slave



Elihu Anthony
Aided Boffman after Porter swindle

Injustice and weather robbed 'Barefoot Pioneer' of fortunes

■ PIONEER

from Page 1B

ney to the gold fields. He then asked Boffman to accompany him to California in exchange for the chance to buy his freedom.

Boffman couldn't refuse. Once he was separated from his owner and pursued by slave hunters' bloodhounds. Another time he was captured by Indians who had never seen a black man before. Each time he managed to return to Baughman; if he hadn't, he would have surrendered the right to buy freedom for his wife and children.

A strike

In the gold fields, Boffman unearthed the \$1,000 price to buy his freedom, plus some extra for himself. He became partners with Samuel McAdams, milling lumber in Zayante, and shipped a load to San Francisco, but the vessel sank in a storm, leaving them destitute. So Boffman planted potatoes and, in February 1860, purchased a 45-acre Rodeo Gulch ranch, planting orchards and grain fields with partner Herman Siegmann.

Against Boffman's advice, Siegmann traded an unbranded colt found on the ranch to Martin Kinsley for a mare and her foal. Kinsley returned several days later with Sheriff John T. Porter, who claimed the colt was his, and that he would imprison them both if they didn't pay him \$200.

Boffman protested that he wasn't involved in the transaction, but Porter insisted that as partners they were equally guilty and compelled them to sign a promissory note for the amount.

Businessman George Otto paid Siegmann's half. But Porter began court proceedings in 1861 demanding the full amount from Boffman, who couldn't contest the suit because blacks were pro-

hibited from testifying in court.

Regrettable ruling

Porter also claimed Otto only paid him \$50, and even Kinsley testified that Porter's entire case was illegal. The judge denounced Porter and regretted having to rule in Porter's favor.

Unable to pay, Boffman sold his ranch at sheriff's sale for \$800, all of which Porter kept. And when he learned Boffman still owned some livestock, Porter ordered that seized and sold as part of the judgment.

Elihu Anthony, a blacksmith and Methodist minister, was appalled by the injustice. He befriended Boffman, gave him a job and place to stay, and looked after his interests to prevent any further mistreatment. Anthony found 80 acres in Vine Hill and helped Boffman file for the land in 1864.

When Anthony didn't hear from Boffman for three weeks, he rode out and found him clearing the land. Boffman told him the brush was so thick, he had to crawl on hands and knees to find a clear spot, and had only eaten a few wild berries all this time. Anthony brought him home, gave him a hot meal and drove him back to the homestead with a wagonload of provisions. Boffman eventually built a cabin with a stone fireplace and planted an orchard and 40-acre vineyard, supplying grapes for the thriving Vine Hill wine industry.

For years Anthony sought word of Boffman's family but to little avail, and Boffman's meager finances made him discouraged at ever seeing his family again. He bought an old mare to help plow but never rode it, so as not to tax its strength unnecessarily. When Boffman obtained a new plow in the 1870s, Anthony was surprised when he learned he carried

it on his back the eight miles home to save the strain on his old horse.

Boffman's nearest neighbors were the Lorenzana and Rodriguez families, whose desperado relations trusted him, and occasionally hid out in his cabin. In September 1871, Tirburcio Vasquez and the Rodriguez boys hid in a nearby canyon after robbing a stagecoach near Hollister. Mateas Lorenzana was hanged, but Boffman cut him down and revived him, and he lived to be over 100 years old.

Boffman was reported dead from snakebite in 1877, only to be discovered the next day weeding his garden with a bandaged hand. Locals concluded it was the snake that died.

In his old age his constant companion was his old dog, Watch. Local children delighted in his many stories, affectionately calling him "Uncle Dave."

One day Anthony told Boffman he had found his oldest daughter, Annie, living in California and sent her money for a train ticket. It was a bittersweet reunion, as Boffman learned his wife had died several years earlier, after having remarried and moved to Kansas, and that his youngest son was his only other living child. Annie stayed six months, making up for lost time before returning home.

In April 1893, Boffman's cabin burned down in a fire started by stray fireplace embers, and once again Anthony took him into his home to live. Boffman was hospitalized, dying that September, and was buried in the Anthony family plot at Odd Fellows Cemetery.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.