

Davis pioneer's hard work paid off

The next time you're downtown, stop by the corner of Second and C streets. Take a close look at the gorgeous white Colonial revival at 137 C St., home of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority.

The Clancy House, which is a city of Davis merit resource, was built in 1913 by an industrious pioneer named Matthew Clancy. The amazing thing about the home is not that it's in such pristine condition 96 years after its erection. It's that the two-story with the massive porch and attractive façade stands as a testament to a life of assiduous effort by a man who overcame great odds.

When Mr. Clancy built that house for his wife and seven daughters, he was already 71 years old. Like the hero of a Horatio Alger tale, Clancy started at the bottom and struggled sedulously until he had achieved the American dream.

His and his family's story are the story of Davis. His children grew up here, married other locals and raised many more children of their own.

Matthew Clancy was born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1842, the same year as the infamous Massacre of Elphinstone's Army, when 16,000 Brits were slaughtered in Afghanistan, fighting a ragtag guerrilla force of fanatics. (Sound familiar?)

Like so many Irish, Clancy suffered through the Great Famine (1845-52) as a child, until he fled his homeland for the dream of a better life in the United States.



In 1858, the year of Bleeding Kansas and the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Matthew, age 16, arrived in Lynn, Mass. After two years of work as a laborer, he moved to New York, hoping for better luck. He found instead a brewing Civil War and teeming masses crowding insalubrious tenements.

In late 1861, California, peaceful, sparsely populated and full of rich farmland, struck Clancy as the place to be. He booked passage on a steamer called the Northern Light for Colón, Panama, crossed the Isthmus by rail and sailed up the Pacific Coast to San Francisco on a ship called the St. Louis.

Matthew Clancy crossed through the Golden Gate on Jan. 4, 1862, just 19½ years old.

In the City, he found work at a dairy. That milking operation was located in what today is Alamo Square, the park that overlooks a famous row of Victorian homes — the Painted Ladies. Those houses, however, weren't built for another 30 years.

After a few months in San Francisco, Clancy decided he wanted to try to make it as a

farmer. He traveled to Sacramento and then settled in Yolo County, where he would spend the rest of his life.

For 11 years, Matthew worked as a farmhand on ranches near Davis. He worked first for George Swingle, who raised cattle and grain and later was a Yolo County supervisor. He then labored for Frederick Wilger, a German immigrant, who late in life was a big real estate baron in our city. And last he worked for Isaac Chiles, the man from whom all the later members of the Chiles family in Davis descend.

(It was Isaac's widow, Bridget Dee, who donated the land that became first the Catholic Cemetery and then the Davis Cemetery. She buried her 47-year-old husband there in 1874.)

Isaac Chiles was not, however, the original Chiles in this region. His uncle, Col. Joseph Ballinger Chiles, namesake of the Chiles Valley in Napa County, made a fortune with his future son-in-law, Jerome C. Davis, running a ferry service across the Sacramento River.

Joseph Chiles used the proceeds of that business to buy a large ranch in Yolo County, ultimately selling the western half to Davis and the eastern half to his nephew, Isaac, with a division at Pole Line Road.

When Mr. Davis went bankrupt and left for Sacramento, the California Pacific Rail Road took control of his large farm and in 1868 built a new station and a new town it called Davisville.

In 1873, when he was 31,

Matthew Clancy began farming on his own for the first time. His first leasehold was 520 acres he rented from his former boss, Fred Wilger. He later rented part of the William Montgomery ranch, which is today's South Davis.

Until he was in his early 40s, Clancy didn't feel he had the means to support a wife and family. But in 1884, at age 42, he met and married Elizabeth Rowan, a native of County Roscommon, Ireland, who was half his age.

He finally became propertied in 1896, when he purchased 160 acres in Solano County, just south of Davis. He farmed that land until 1910, when he bought a 221-acre ranch northeast of town.

In addition to the properties he owned, Clancy continued to lease farms from others, raising grain and cattle. At the turn of the 20th century, he was farming the land that later became College Park, then beyond the city limits.

Matthew Clancy was 82 years old when he died in 1925. He's buried in the Davis Cemetery, near four of his daughters and his wife Elizabeth, who lived until 1942. Their plots are on the south side of the necropolis, not far from members of the Chiles family.

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