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Family bids farewell to homestead

By MJ Valencia

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OAKLEY - Although almost in tears, Katy Burroughs Treat is coming to terms with leaving her family's land.

After 98 years and three generations, the Burroughs family will leave its roots at 5401 Jersey Island Road.

The most difficult part for Treat, the current resident of the home, is knowing that someone else will take over the home that her grandfather bought in 1906 as one of the first American settlers in East Contra Costa. The ranch and adjoining properties will be turned into marshland by the state in the next few years.

"I want to remember it as it is right now," said Treat, who is moving to Jackson in Amador County.

In 1926, the Cape Cod style home was built for \$10,000.

Benjamin Burroughs, Treat's grandfather, started with a 60-cow dairy farm and used the "Walnut Grove Farm" label to sell bottled milk. He also had businesses in Oakland and Stockton and helped build four levees in East County as the secretary of the first board of trustees for Reclamation District 799.

"My father was a good farmer and also a businessman and enjoyed sales," said Ernest Burroughs, Benjamin's son and Treat's father. "He was a real good man and understood how to get along with people. He didn't require perfection."

The Burroughs Ranch was sold in October 2003 to make way for the Dutch Slough Tidal Marsh Restoration Project. The home will be rented out by the state until the project starts, possibly in two years. Then, the land where the home sits could be flooded.

The property was sold along with the Emerson and Gilbert ranches for \$28 million. The 917 acres are part of the 60,000 to 84,000 acres in the Delta and San Francisco Bay that are to be used for marsh restoration. The project includes a 55-acre public park.

Treat, 41, has lived on the ranch with her husband, Rob, for 19 years and plans to move out at the end of July.

The ranch is on a dirt path just off Cypress Road. A left turn at the faded white "Vista Livestock" sign leads to the two-story white house with green shutters. The original hardwood floor is still intact and has only been refinished.

The atmosphere and quaintness have not changed either, Treat said.

The property was bought in 1906 by Treat's grandfather. He moved to California from Illinois at the age of 18 and delivered milk in San Francisco.

In 1910, he married Edna Nelson, a teacher and UC Berkeley graduate. The couple had five children - Cynthia, Renny, Oscar, Philip and Ernest.

When Benjamin died in 1942, Oscar and Ernest Burroughs took over the farm and carried on Burroughs Bros. Inc., the name of their father and uncles' dairy business.

In 1948, Ernest moved into the house with his wife, Loo. Edna split her time living on the ranch and in Orland with her son Oscar.

Ernest, the youngest of five children, had a close relationship with his mother. He feels fortunate Edna helped raise his children.

The siblings ran the dairy until 1977 and Ernest moved the operation to Denair, near Turlock. Edna died in 1982. The house was then occupied on and off by a missionary couple until Treat moved back into the house in 1985, after marrying Rob. Ernest later gave the ranch to his children.

Treat remembers her grandmother as a vibrant person who loved reading, gardening and politics.

"She was in her 90s, but she'd still argue politics with you," Treat said. Edna kept a book of memoirs about the people and work on the ranch. Treat said Edna never wrote about vacation, only work.

Benjamin and Edna enjoyed life, but they didn't spend much time traveling for pleasure, Ernest said.

The couple instilled strong values in their children.

"I learned the value of hard work from the house," said Cynthia Burroughs Hummel, 91, who recalls spending hours waxing the floors.

Those same values were passed on to Treat and her siblings.

"Work was a big part of growing up," she said. "It taught all of us perseverance, commitment to family...and responsibility."

Although Treat has mixed feelings about leaving the house, she is glad that it will become part of something that others will enjoy.

"I'm very satisfied that it's going to be open space and will be used for something hopefully beautiful," Treat said.

Ernest agreed.

"I think both of my parents would be pleased to see that happen," he said.