

That 'Ugly' Old Metal Building

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, December 30, 2001

It wasn't much to look at. The outer walls were of corrugated tin and covered with a less than eye-pleasing red paint. The end facing on 620 East Main Street was overgrown with ivy, effectively hiding the old structure from public scrutiny.

The building was becoming pretty run down and the decision was made this year to take it down.

The Vacaville Heritage Council and Vacaville Museum had been using the building for storage for several years. I couldn't help wondering what all the "other stuff" stored in this dingy warehouse was. It was a strange jumble of pieces of walls, old artifacts, lights, and clothing.

Recently I learned that the structure began its life as a city corporation storage area with an annex in back for fire department equipment. But there was much more to this old dilapidated building; this story is about a group of local folks who used it to provide the community with a great deal of fun and escape from the tedious day-to-day routine.

It all began in 1963 when Betty Forte Valentine, a member of the Vacaville St. Mary's Women's Club, organized a melodrama group as a fund-raising project. In 1964 they put on their first play, "On the Bridge at Midnight."

The endeavor was such a success that the Vacaville Fiesta Days Committee asked the group to perform as part of the celebration in subsequent years. At first they went by the name, St. Mary's Players, and later the Golden Jubilee Players. They conducted plays at schools, in churches and wherever they were invited. Audiences very much enjoyed the performances by this small group.

Success followed success, and in 1968, at the instigation of Jim Spears, the Vacaville Art League took the theater group under its wing and they became known as the V.A.L. Players.

Now that they were a part of a larger organization, they decided they needed a more permanent home to rehearse and to stage their plays. When the opportunity arose to lease the building next to the old Vacaville Town Hall from the city, the Art League jumped at it. The building was a mess and not particularly suited to becoming a theater, but that did not stop these determined thespians. They rolled up their sleeves and went

to work

The tasks were many, including cleanup, decorating, adding new walls, installation of a stage, adding matting to the walls to control sound and arranging for seating. In a 1968 photo of the work in progress, Eleanor Brewen, Betty Lorenzo, and Marie Holeb are shown hard at work hanging matting, a not altogether easy task. The group stuck to the job at hand and soon the V.A.L. players had their very own theater readied for performances.

Then it was time to decide what plays to present, select actors and actresses, build sets and props, and publicize upcoming performances. The group did it all, and soon it was time to see if all the hard work would pay off.

A full house included about 90 theatergoers. The plays were so popular that you could routinely count on standing-room-only crowds. With plays written by Neil Simon, Noel Coward, and James Barrie and enticing titles including "Pure as the Driven Snow," "Marriage, English Style," and "The Moonkeyshines of 1970" (yes, that's the correct spelling) they packed the house time after time.

But presenting plays and skits written by famous people isn't all they accomplished: they even came up with their own playwrights. Alice McDonald's "Time Wounds All Heels" drew full houses and excellent reviews.

It appears the last play at 620 East Main St. was another offering by Alice McDonald, "Virtue Is Its Own Reward or All That Glitters May Be Gold" which ran May 26 and 27, for the 16th annual celebration of Fiesta Days in 1973.

But as with all good things, the group eventually disbanded. I'm not even sure what year or why, but it happened, and with it another great group of volunteers went on to other things.

The brief interlude of culture provided Vacaville some very enjoyable times and memories before the old tin building became just another dusty warehouse of memories, of dust and clutter.

Recently, the Vacaville Heritage Council and the museum received word that we had to remove all equipment stored in the building. The old V.A.L. Theater was scheduled for destruction as part of the downtown renovation and at that time I really didn't know anything about its history.

The Vacaville Heritage Council has, over the years, become sort of a sounding board for many old-timers as well as newcomers. Sometimes it almost resembles the old

cracker-barrel-and-potbellied-stove scene with all the locals just passing the day in conversation and remedying the world's woes.

Several longtime residents began to talk about the "Old VAL Theater" next door and slowly I began to learn a little of its past and I was getting an earful of the history of the V.A.L. Players. One day Ray McDonald brought in his wife's scrapbooks that she had filled with clippings, autographs and promotional material she had scrupulously saved. I was able to learn a little of what must have been a great group of volunteers who had a lot of fun, worked hard and contributed much to the richness of a community they loved.

There are many stories like this about Vacaville and because of folks like Ray McDonald and his wife, the memories are retained as history that could very well have been forgotten as the community grows. For that reason, I wish to thank Ray and dedicated this day's article to him and to the memory of his wife, Alice, as well as all the volunteers that have contributed so much to Vacaville.

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