

## **Solano: The town that never was**

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

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Throughout the years of prosperous agriculture, land speculation cropped up, enticing buyers to settle in Solano County.

One of the most elaborate schemes occurred in 1913, when a group of San Francisco businessmen began buying up large tracts of land between Suisun, Elmira and Rio Vista, east of where Travis Air Force Base sits today and north of Highway 12.

In December 1912, these businessmen formed Solano Irrigated Farms, which incorporated on Tuesday, Jan. 22, 1913. By early January, they had set an unprecedented public relation campaign in motion.

On Jan. 31, the Vacaville Reporter wrote, "Gigantic Project. Company With \$7,500,000 Will Develop Solano Land. It is Securing Large Tracts And Already Owns Nearly 100,000 Acres Which Will Be Irrigated ... The life of the corporation is fixed at 50 years, and the capital stock is \$7,500,000, divided into 75,000 shares of a par value of \$100 each ... This company is the outgrowth of the organization of a number of San Francisco and eastern capitalists which has purchased nearly 100,000 acres of land in the eastern part of the county for the purpose of development under a large irrigation system, plans for which are already under way."

The article continued with the news that the 5,000-acre Muzzy ranch had been added to their holdings, at a cost of \$325,000. "This ranch is famous throughout the country for the quality of stock which it has raised, as the Muzzy sheep have been in special demand for the last decade. This is the largest undivided estate of this character in Solano County, and will now be brought under water and cut up into small farms. These farms will be on the main line of the Vallejo & Northern Railroad, running between San Francisco and Sacramento." A.J. Rich of San Francisco was named as the head of the purchasing company.

Another 11,000 acres, the Hastings tract, were added in February at a cost of \$650,000. This land ran along the Oakland & Antioch Railroad. The Vacaville Reporter announced on Feb. 21, 1913: "The Solano Irrigated Farm Company will eventually place the entire acreage under water and subdivide. The western section of this land, long used for sheep, has been shown to be extremely fertile and will yield an immense crop under irrigation."

With each additional announcement, a picture began to emerge. Large tracts of land, until then used mainly for sheep farming, were purchased. Most tracts ran along one of the railroad lines or spurs already in existence. The company promised to subdivide the holdings into small farms and to bring in water to enable the potential purchaser to plant crops such as wheat. All this was undertaken at an amazing speed.

"The Solano Irrigated Farms, Inc., probably will break all records for speed in development," continued the Vacaville Reporter on Feb. 21. "The company now has 10,000 acres in barley; 10,000 acres in addition have been leased for beans this spring; 15 caterpillars are at work breaking up the land; two immense ditchers, four dredgers, besides a large number of small machines engaged in canal work; five survey parties are in the field, and agricultural engineers are making detail and complete soil survey. - San Francisco Examiner."

During the next few weeks, the newspaper repeated its title line, "Buy Another Tract" several times. Each time, the acreage purchased ranged in the thousands, the property was deemed "among the most valuable in Solano county" and the purchase sums were large.

On March 21, the newspaper announced the next step: "New Town of Solano. The Solano Irrigated Farms Co. has completed platting and is commencing construction of the new city situated midway between Suisun, Elmira and Dixon, on the line of the Oakland-Antioch railway, which will be known as Solano.

"The city will occupy 1,500 acres of land and will be laid out along modern subdivision lines. Plans for a reinforced concrete fire-proof hotel of 50 rooms, bank building and a large number of residences are already under way.

"Arrangements are about consummated for telephone connections, water and lighting and a post office."

More land was added, and on April 11, "It is stated the Solano Irrigated Farms will have water in the first 700-acre reservoir by the first of May, completing the main canal in less than four years, and will probably set world's record for speed in irrigation development. This canal is 9 miles long, 75 feet wide, and 17 feet deep, and on May 1 500,000 cubic feet of earth will have been removed with five dredgers constantly at work."

Eventually to be connected to the Sacramento River, "The new Solano canal has already been dredged at the new city in a circle forming an ideal harbor, probably not equaled for the easy handling of shipping at any point outside the bay cities. Thus ships, instead of being compelled to turn around after discharging cargo, simply follow

the line of the canal to return the same way.

"With water connection to San Francisco and by the Oakland-Antioch railway connecting Solano by rail with Sacramento and the interior valleys, this new city will probably be better equipped than any of its older rivals in the county." (May 9, 1913)

Two weeks later, the Vacaville Reporter announced that water from the Lindsay slough was indeed filling the new reservoir and the system canals running off it. A distance of 17 miles had been dredged in less than 50 working days.

On June 20, the company let prospective buyers know that it "has engaged Professor Hyde of the University of California, authority on water purification, to take charge of and erect at once a complete filtration and sterilization plant, for furnishing water to the new city of Solano and the surrounding country ... A plant with a capacity of 200,000 gallons per minute will be erected. Suisun may also be served."

The fevered pitch reached its highest point on July 18. "Pretentious Plans For Solano City" announced the Vacaville Reporter. "Solano City will be the next real estate sensation flashed on the California market ... Thirty blocks in the new city have already been spoken for, and inquiries for mercantile and other locations have been greater than the company could care for."

The city was laid out for 75,000 inhabitants (the whole county had less than 30,000 residents). "The first allotment will include about 1,000 acres of business and residence lots, and the price ... will be within the reach of the moderate investor."

"Solano," Mark Daniels, landscapist and student of municipalities, was quoted, "is the only city on the Pacific West Coast, the second in America (Washington being the other one) and one of the few in the world that has been started and planned all through, to its last detail, before any construction was begun ... Solano will be one of the most beautiful cities in the world."

The city would be the business center for the 120,000 acres of Solano irrigated farms surrounding it. Electric trains would connect it with Sacramento and San Francisco. Eight thoroughfares radiated from a civic center in the middle of the city. Schools, city hall and a library were planned. Every residential street would be watered down in the middle and would be lined with shade trees. "For this purpose 1,000,000 seedlings are to be set out at once in the company's nursery."

During the next few months, thousands of people came to see this wonderful new city. After an especially heavy day, A.J. Rich & Co. reported via the Vacaville Reporter on Aug. 1, "A heavy demand for town lots from nearly every person who visited the site."

And then there was silence. No further articles in the Vacaville Reporter extolled the wonders of the new city. Not until Oct. 17 did readers learn that "Big Company is in Financial Trouble. According to reports, the Solano Irrigated Farm Co. ... has failed and is now in the hands of the receiver. The attempt of the company to promote the project on limited capital is said to be responsible for its failure.

"It is said that the corporation went into the hand of a receiver Thursday of last week, but that the matter has been kept quiet in the hope that some satisfactory arrangements might be made with the creditors. Most of the notes and mortgages given by the company became due on the first of the month and the concern was unable to meet them."

And that was the end of it. Not much is left to remind us today of Solano City. Calhoun and Hastings Cuts still carry water. A spur of the Bay Area Electric Railroad runs from the Western Railroad Museum to Jepson Prairie. The Eucalyptus trees on Jepson Prairie are the sole reminder of those 1,000,000 seedlings grown to shade the streets. And many local farmers, who had bought bonds to finance the dredging of the two Cuts, lost their investments.

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