

Fires change the face of Vacaville

By Jerry Bowen

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I was kickin' back at the Vacaville Heritage Council, cogitating on what I should write about this week, when I happened to glance at a couple of photos of Vacaville in the old days.

In one, taken about 1866, you can see the old Davis Hotel that started life when pioneers Luzena and Mason Wilson built it. It was later bought by General E.S. Davis. The hotel was located at the corner of Davis and East Main streets, where the opera house is today.

The other was a photo of the Chapman Harness Shop on the northwest corner of Dobbins and Main streets. The shop had a very unusual sign for its day.

I realized I didn't know when or what caused the demise of these two distinctive buildings, so I gathered old Vacaville Heritage Council records and strained my eyeballs reading the library's old newspaper microfilms. The information was all there.

The days were hot and dry in Vacaville in November 1888 and the north winds were howling as usual, especially late at night.

General E.S. Davis, the owner of the Davis Hotel, passed away on Nov. 6 and his body was placed in the hotel while arrangements were being made for the funeral.

During the day, fruit wagons from the surrounding ranches jammed narrow Main Street on their way to the railroad fruit shipping sheds. The year had been fairly prosperous and Vacaville, with a population of about 700, had visions of continued growth. Talk of incorporating was in the air and the Cleveland-Harrison election for president was in progress.

On Tuesday evening, Nov. 7, three men were overheard as they commented that they "intended to burn the town tonight." The person that heard the ominous conversation reported it to George Parker, who passed it off as having no credibility.

The night wore on, the north wind began to build, the saloons in town were doing a good business, and votes were being counted that had been cast at the election the day before.

A citizen out on the town noticed a glow behind D.K. Corn's Feed and Livery Stable on the northeast corner of Main and Bernard streets. Suddenly the glow erupted into a sheet of flame fed by the wind and it licked hungrily at the buildings to the east, heading for the wooden bridge over Ulatis Creek. Within minutes, the angry inferno consumed Hackes Stove and Tin Shop, homes in the area, George Newport's Furniture Wareroom, the Good Templar's Hall, Kuhlman's Tailor Shop, and Fowler's Butcher Shop. The offices of Dr. Stitt and dentist Dr. N.B. Church in the wooden building next to the bridge were the last to go on the north side of Main Street, and the bridge was in danger of being next.

Lack of interest during the years immediately before the fire left Vacaville without a fire department, even though it had suffered other major fire-related calamities in 1877. Citizens rushed to do what they could with buckets of water and wet blankets.

The fire took on the fury of a tornado as the inferno crossed the street, enveloping the brick Davis Hotel where the body of the owner lay. The hotel had survived the fires of 1877 and boasted the only fire suppression equipment in town. It had a tank of water on top and hoses throughout the building, but the fire was too furious and nothing could slow its destructive path.

The flames roared up the street, wiping out the hotel, the Bank of Vacaville, Donovan's Barber Shop, the Odd Fellows Hall and Bennett's Saloon.

Then without warning, cartridge powder and coal oil cans began exploding - throwing chunks of debris into the air and scattering everyone nearby, which added to the danger of the conflagration.

The fire continued west to Elizabeth Street where it destroyed Hewitt's Jewelry Shop, the post office, Miller's Drug Store, Blum's Merchandise and Yeates and Elliot's Grocery Store. The major part of the business section of Vacaville, two entire blocks, was reduced to hot embers and rubble.

The culprits were never apprehended.

By the following week, several businesses had relocated or were busy rebuilding, mostly on the south side of Main Street. Concern was expressed that more brick should be used as a construction material and the need for fewer wooden buildings. Over time, the area on the north side of Main Street was rebuilt as a collection of wooden buildings and saloons. The Davis Hotel never was rebuilt and remained a weed-infested lot until Sydney Walker built the Opera House in 1897.

A call went out among the businessmen to widen Main Street, but apparently went the

same way as past plans for a fire department.

It wasn't until two years later and more fires in town that Vacaville citizens finally got serious about a fire department, and even then it wasn't adequate.

Many businesses have come and gone over the years but it's interesting to note that the south side of the street never suffered another major fire after the 1888 blaze. The structures did suffer major damage in the 1892 earthquake, but were repaired. As a result, we can still enjoy the historic character of those old buildings today.

The two-story building housing the Bennett Saloon on the ground floor, is today the Mary Cornelison Photography Shop. When it was a saloon, it was rated as one of the finest parlors in Solano County. It had stained-glass front windows, and featured the finest paneling available inside. It did a booming business and Bennett later was quoted as being in favor of Vacaville being incorporated, "as long as license fees were raised to \$1,000 a year to keep disreputable places out of business."

Today you easily can recognize Bennett's building because his initials are prominently built into the top of the front wall: "ELB."

As for the other photo I was looking at, the Chapman Harness and Saddlery Shop had a beautiful sign with the trademark elephants playing a tug-of-war with a leather harness. The very prominent sign curved around the corner of the shop located on the northwest intersection of Dobbins and Main, where Kappel & Kappel Realty is today.

It was a wood frame building and it survived the Nov. 8, 1888, disaster because it was a full block away from Corn's Livery Stable, where the fire started. Unfortunately, on Aug. 28, 1890, some nefarious characters set a fire in the lower section of Chapman's shop. Five more buildings in downtown Vacaville went up in flames, including Chapman's.

Last but not least, here's a bit of trivia: Three streets in Vacaville are named after one man. What is his name? I'll tell you in my next column.

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