

Light shone on town history via lamppost

By Jerry Bowen

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Whenever I walk around our historic downtown, I often try to imagine what it must have been like in the early days when the boundary of Vacaville ended at Parker Street. In fact, one day I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I walked smack-dab right into one of the old lampposts and bent my glasses up.

Boy, did I feel foolish as I looked around, hoping no one noticed my impromptu lamppost dance.

Today, the intersection of Parker and Main is occupied by Gold's Gym, the Old Post Office Seafood & Grill restaurant, Vacaville Food & Liquor Store and the Vacaville Chamber of Commerce.

Back in the late 1880's the streets of Vacaville were hot and dusty in summer and muddy and barely navigable in the winter. In 1888, the intersection of Parker and Main was the western edge of town and the only buildings existing at this location were a hotel and a private residence.

In 1884 E. P. Williams built the hotel on the northeast corner of Parker and Main at a cost of \$5,470 where the Old Post Office Seafood & Grill restaurant is today. Not very attractive by today's standards, the building was basically a square two-story wooden structure with tiny rooms that had no indoor plumbing. There is some speculation it might have originally been named the William Hotel but the first hard evidence I found is on an 1888 Sanborn Map that lists it as the Western Hotel and ads in the Vacaville Reporter.

Around the end of 1888, a Mrs. Meyers from Elmira purchased the building and renamed it the Brunswick Hotel. It passed through the hands of several more owners and at one time was named the Vaca Valley Hotel.

The rest of the intersection was empty land except for a small home on the southwest corner. The lot where the Chamber of Commerce is today was an 1800s version of a parking lot with hitching posts for horses.

In 1900, Raleigh Barcar, who started the Vacaville Reporter, bought and refurbished the building and in 1901 renamed it the Raleigh Hotel.

The hotel was not a big success. Barcar hired a famous chef in 1906, Frank Pierpont, in an effort to attract clients to the dining room. But, in 1907 the chef died of blood poisoning.

The building managed to survive the disastrous fires and earthquakes of the 1880s and early 1900s, but flames finally consumed it in July 1909 during a spectacular fire. Across the street was the Presbyterian Church that had been built in 1891 (Gold's Gym's parking lot today). The fire was so fierce that the steeple on the church caught fire. In a spectacular show of courage, Guy Bassett, George Akerly and C. E. Lawrence managed to save the church by cutting the burning steeple loose and pulling it to the ground. For the next 11 years, Vacaville went without a hotel and the church remained without a steeple.

The early 1900s brought sweeping changes to the country including the automobile and interesting new laws such as "Motor vehicles may not drive on city streets unless a man with a lantern is walking ahead of it," and ordinances such as one that forbade parking for more than two hours unless a horse was tied to the car.

The old empty lot on the southeast corner was finally to receive attention. Since 1858 Vacaville had had only temporary locations that served as reading rooms or libraries. In 1905 an attempt was made by the Woman's Improvement Club to obtain funding for a Carnegie Library. It failed, but efforts of the Saturday Club in 1910 ultimately succeeded. The new Carnegie Library was finally dedicated on the lot in 1915.

When the new library next to City Hall was built, the Carnegie building was abandoned as a library. Various businesses occupied the old structure over the following years and today it serves as the Vacaville Chamber of Commerce headquarters.

The Vacaville Post Office was first established on June 1, 1854, and was mistakenly listed as the "Vackerville PO." The post office was housed in several buildings over the next 83 years, including the Gillespie Building (Heritage House Cafe on the site today), Crystal Building (currently Amphletts) and the Triangle Building.

The first permanent Vacaville Post Office was built on the site of the old Hotel Raleigh. Excavation for the basement in 1937 uncovered the old Raleigh Hotel safe and was reburied because it was empty and badly damaged. The post office was dedicated by Postmaster Harry Talbot on March 12, 1938, and remained in operation until 1967 when the service was moved to Cernon Street.

In 1974 the words United States Post Office were chipped off from above the door and replaced by a sign for Jake's Wine & Liquors. Since then, it also has had several businesses and restaurants. Today the building houses the Old Post Office Seafood

and Grill.

Over the years, the little home on the southwest corner was added onto and maintained. It was originally owned by a member of the Buck family and later bought by S. P. Dobbins who owned a grocery store in town. Dobbins raised three sons in the home - Judge Sinclair Dobbins, Sterling and Stanley.

Later Del McCune bought the house and had it demolished in 1964 in order to build a commercial building. Vacaville Food and Liquor Store is the current occupant.

Old-time Vacaville residents are proud of their town and we can all be thankful that our city's politicians and owners have resisted tearing down many of the historic buildings in the core downtown area in the name of redevelopment. The next time you visit the Farmers Market for fresh produce, take a good look around and imagine what it used to be like. There are plenty of reminders of the old days when everybody knew everyone else and usually lent a helping hand when it was needed. I always enjoy it when the "old-timers" drop by the Vacaville Heritage Council in the Old Town Hall and share their experiences. It is interesting how many of those memories are recalled as the "good old days," even when times were hard.

No one correctly answered the trivia question in my last column. The three streets that are named after one man are: William Street, Boyd Street and Parker Street, all named after William Boyd Parker.

I also need to clear up the photo caption in my last column. The man leaning against the tree may possibly be General Davis and to the left of him is the corner of the Davis Hotel.

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