

# Glorious memories of the Nut Tree

By Jerry Bowen

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Driving by the old Nut Tree the other day brought back a few memories as my 90-year-old mother, Iris, remarked, "What happened to the Nut Tree?"

Her recollections go back to 1950 when we relocated from North Dakota to California via the old "Historic Route 40."

Tired and ready for a break, we were flatlanders in awe of the incredible mountain range we had crossed earlier in the day in a pick-up-truck and an old Buick, each loaded to the brim with all our belongings. Then we spotted the Nut Tree. That was our first experience with Vacaville's famous landmark.

Our connection to the Nut Tree continued through the years. My father had owned and flown airplanes for as long as I can remember and he and my mother would fly from San Lorenzo to the Nut Tree to have lunch with my wife and I. My dad is gone now and mom has moved into our fair city and is amazed at all the changes that have taken place in the last quarter-century.

Of course the Nut Tree has been around a lot longer than the memories of our family and for most of the folks who live here today. The weed-choked lots and deteriorating 80-foot-long sign leave little clue of the once-popular business that attracted people from all over the country and, in fact, the world.

It all started with a small roadside fruit stand in 1921 alongside what was then the Lincoln Highway and grew into a business that was known all over the country. Alas, the Nut Tree is no more and many of its buildings soon will be dismantled to make way for an innovative new development, but the Nut Tree Airport will live on in name and fact.

The airport was nonexistent when we first stopped here in 1950, but an impromptu landing of a failing plane in 1930 planted a seed in an entrepreneur's mind for the future facility. You might say it was much like the seed planted by Sallie Fox some 80 years earlier that grew to become the symbol of the famous Nut Tree Restaurant and Gift Store.

Airplanes were still a popular curiosity in the '20s and '30s when Ernie Smith flew into the Dixon Airport and was asked by a group of locals if they could go for a ride. Smith,

who had plenty of barnstorming experience under his belt, including having been the first to fly from the continental United States to Hawaii, was quick to agree.

The little two-seat, fabric-covered aircraft roared into the sky from Dixon with his passenger and headed in the direction of Vacaville. As so many of the early craft were prone to do, the engine began to develop a problem and Ernie quickly looked for a safe place to land. Following the Lincoln Highway, he spotted an open area near a eucalyptus grove on the Nut Tree Ranch. During the landing he damaged a wing, but both he and his passenger, who most likely was very frightened, were unhurt.

The Power family, including Edwin Sr., Helen, Ed Jr. and Robert rushed to see the unexpected arrival. Several photos were taken of the family with Smith's flying machine and the fascination of flying apparently was planted in their minds, although it took another 25 years for the seed of an airport to grow to fruition.

In 1955 Ed Power Jr. was responsible for building the first Nut Tree landing strip as an attraction for pilots to the already popular restaurant. It was a smart move and many pilots began to use the airport, described as one of the most innovative private airports in the nation. It even got a two-page spread in the October 1960 issue of the Saturday Evening Post.

The first Nut Tree Railroad was built in 1951 and was run by Edwin "Bunny" Power's brother, Joe. The train, originally built for the pilots' convenience, was smaller than the one most folks remember today as the "No. 5" version that was introduced around 1971. While most tourists paid to ride the train around the complex, pilots who landed at the airport rode for free from the landing strip to the restaurant and back. It was a marvelous success, as was proven by the thousands of folks who rode it each year.

In 1974, the Power family stepped back from the day-to-day operation of the Nut Tree with the formation of the Nut Tree Associates, an operational organization within the Nut Tree. Some of the employees said that it was the beginning of the end of the Nut Tree "family" as they called themselves.

The restaurant and gift shops continued to operate until about 1994 when the news broke that the Nut Tree had lost approximately \$5 million.

Legal action among the partners ensued and resulted in a settlement that called for the sale of the business in 1995.

The Nut Tree closed on Jan. 24, 1996. The "Nut Tree family" employees, many of whom had worked there for decades, were suddenly out of work, although some were absorbed by a subsidiary, the Coffee Tree, located across the freeway.

Although the Vacaville landmark is closed, part of the legacy was to remain and continue to carry the name "Nut Tree."

Earlier, in 1968, the city of Vacaville had begun to look into the possibility of buying a piece of land for an airport. The search eventually turned toward the Nut Tree Airport as the logical facility. After negotiations with the owners, they agreed to dedicate the runway to the county as long as the name "Nut Tree Airport" would be retained. By 1972 plans and improvements to the airport were in progress. The runway was extended and new parking areas and hangars were built and improvements have continued to the present.

The Vacaville City Council, decided to buy the Nut Tree Property in 2000 in order to control development of the area. It appears to have been a wise decision, as the latest plan for the area appears to be well-thought-out and will retain the historic Harbison House as part of the development.

For 75 years the entrepreneurial skills of the Power family made a major contribution to the historic legacy of Vacaville and even though most of the Nut Tree facilities will be gone, it will be remembered with considerable affection by the many who have passed through its doors.

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