

# **It was a sign of the times in Fairfield**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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In the 1920s the label "Twin Cities" was used to describe Fairfield/Suisun as Fairfield gained in economic importance.

Up until that time Suisun City dominated the economic scene because of its location next to a shipping waterway and railroad. This shift in prestige and influence is reflected in the relocation of The Solano Republican from Suisun to Fairfield in 1923. However, another symbol that signaled Fairfield's coming of age was the installation of the Fairfield sign that hangs over West Texas Street. The story of it reveals an interesting vignette of the times.

Community clubs, service and social organizations were offsprings of merchants' associations in the early 1900s. Community picnics and other gatherings sponsored by the clubs would attract around 10 percent of the population during the early years of the 1900s.

However, the community clubs began to wither due to a lack of motivated members. Members of the Fairfield Community Club decided to investigate the possibility of joining the Lions Clubs during a meeting in late July 1924 to reinvigorate community interest. David A. Weir, editor of The Solano Republican and member of the Fairfield Community Club wrote, "Membership in a Lions club is a pledge of public service and whenever the Lions assemble, plans are made and executed for the betterment of that community." As a result, the Fairfield Lions Club was organized at the July 30 meeting.

A committee of the Fairfield Community Club met with the Sacramento Lions Club to plan a charter night for the proposed Fairfield den. The same committee also was given the task of producing ... tentative plans and specifications for a concrete or steel sign to be placed at the outskirts of Fairfield.

The first mention of what was to become the Fairfield Sign showed up in the Aug. 28, 1924, edition of The Solano Republican. The article stated, "It was pointed out that many travelers pass town after town without learning the name of it, and it is proposed that the sign will read 'Fairfield, County Seat of Solano County.' These plans will then be laid before the Town Board and they will be asked to help finance such a sign." One of the members of the three-man committee given the task of coming up with plans for the sign was Howard Goosen, 25-year-old son of Henry Goosen.

At its Sept. 2 meeting, the Fairfield Town Board set aside a small portion of the town tax rate ... "for the steel arch to be erected at the west entrance of Texas Street."

A Sept. 4, 1924, Solano Republican article stated, "The Board reviewed plans of a proposed street arch designating the name of 'Fairfield, County Seat of Solano County' at a cost of approximately \$980 at its November 18th meeting."

An illustration of the sign accompanying a Dec. 11, 1924, Solano Republican article portrayed a sign somewhat more grandiose and awkward-looking than the one ultimately erected. It consisted of two joined signs: one, a 50-foot-wide arch with the word "Fairfield" in letters two feet high, and, suspended from this, a stepped rectangular sign bearing the words "County Seat of Solano County" in 10-inch letters. This was to have been hung on stuccoed poles 30-feet high and "...illuminated so that it will be visible for eight to ten miles."

It was obvious that the Fairfield Town Board was receptive to the idea of a sign, but money was needed to obtain property for a town dump. The \$980 set aside for the sign was ultimately used for the property.

With the loss of the sign imminent, M. E. Parr, a member of the Town Board and the proprietor of Fairfield Battery and Electric Works, began a fund-raising campaign. A raffle for a donated washing machine was initiated and the Lions sold tickets for 50 cents each.

By the end of January, \$700 had been collected, enough to proceed with the plan. The minutes of the Feb. 3, 1925, meeting of the Town Board read: "upon a motion of Trustee Withrow, the Board ordered the Chairman to sign a contract with the National Electric Sign Company for the furnishing of an electric sign to be placed across Texas Street at a cost of \$924 FOB, Fairfield. Said sign to be purchased on terms, ten percent being paid at the time of the execution of the contract and the remainder in nine months without interest."

A tentative location for the sign between Jackson and Webster streets on Texas Street was selected "... that being the geographical center of Fairfield."

A final design for the sign was submitted and approved in March 1925 bearing the slogan: "Fairfield, County Seat of Solano County." The National Electric Sign Company of Oakland was selected to build the sign.

The sign was ready by mid-March, but the contractor had yet to provide the support poles. Eventually, heavy iron poles were ready and shipped to Fairfield where they were set in concrete in the middle of the 800 block of Texas Street two weeks before

the sign was hung. The Great Western Power Company, contracted to supply current to the sign and Goosen Hardware Company donated a drinking fountain that was installed at the base of one of the poles.

The sign, arriving on Oct. 22 on a National Electric Sign Company truck, was hoisted into place and electrical cables hooked up.

The Solano Republican devoted a large portion of the front page of its Oct. 22 edition to the new sign, and printed the following announcement:

“The Fairfield Lions Club invites the community to join in an unveiling ceremony to take place on Texas Street, Fairfield, tomorrow (Friday) night, commencing at 7:30, when the new street sign will blaze forth the illuminated fact that this is the Town of Fairfield, County Seat of Solano County.”

Fairfield's new sign “blazed forth” with 80 incandescent light bulbs illuminating the new symbol of Fairfield's pride. At 8:30 Friday evening, Oct. 23, 1925, hundreds of local people attended the ceremony led by Lion Chairman S. R. Sonneland. The street under the gleaming new sign was sprinkled with street wax and couples danced “till a late hour” to the music of Tony Lawrence and the Twin City Orchestra.

In the years following its installation, the Fairfield Sign underwent little change until the early 1930s when it was converted to the “amazing new neon” for illumination. The town of Fairfield continued to pay a monthly maintenance fee to the National Electric Sign Company (and its successors: Electric Products Corporation, Federal Sign and Signal Corporation, and Ad Art Signs, Inc.).

With the passage of time and succession of sign companies, the ownership of the sign became clouded until the city of Fairfield finally conceded ownership to the Federal Sign and Signal Corporation in 1961. In the meantime, the sign's appearance had deteriorated.

The city had also passed a sign ordinance requiring downtown merchants to replace all overhanging signs on Texas Street with flush ones. In early 1961, the Fairfield Planning Commission recommended to the City Council that the Fairfield sign be removed.

Opposition to the Planning Commissions recommendation was immediate and widespread. One citizen wrote the Council: “I do not agree that Texas Street would look better ... I ask you to take into consideration the feelings of many people.” Another wrote: “I think that anything that has become a landmark, such as that sign, should remain.” The editor of The Daily Republican called the sign “the most distinctive landmark” in Fairfield, and added, “Most of us haven't been here thirty five years and

can't imagine how the city would look without the 'Fairfield' sign overhanging Texas Street."

The Fairfield City Council rejected the notion of removing the sign at its next meeting.

In 1961, the sign was painted blue with white lettering with a thin yellow stripe along the border and around the letters of the word "Fairfield."

Over the following years, the sign began to deteriorate once again. Some of the letters wouldn't light up at night. Then a couple of years ago the sign was overhauled.

The sign once again reflects pride in Fairfield as the city celebrates its 100th year since it was incorporated ... and that's as it should be.

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In my last article, I mixed up the presidents in the first paragraph. It was Harrison who died one month after assuming office, Tyler who was vice president and assumed the office after Harrison died and Polk that followed Tyler. A big thanks to an old friend, Alan Jarlson, and Vacaville Christian School history teacher, Steve Jacobs, both of whom obviously know our history. Thanks for your interest in keeping history correct.

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