

Church got its start in schoolhouse

By Jerry Bowen

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When Thomas Thompson arrived in California in 1849, he found that the state was predominately Catholic and that he was the only Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) preacher in the state.

After preaching for a few months, he went to Stockton to stay for the winter. There he founded the first Christian Church in California and later the Santa Clara Christian Church in the Santa Clara valley.

Arculus C. Hawkins and wife arrived in Vaca Valley in 1852, purchased several thousand acres from Manuel Vaca, and planted fruit trees to earn a livelihood and raise a family.

Another early settler who became identified with the local Christian Church was Jediah Williams.

In the summer of 1854, Byrum Lewis, a pioneer preacher, arrived in Vaca Valley to visit with his sister and family, Mr. and Mrs. Jediah Williams. At the time, the only other church in Vacaville was the Methodist Episcopal Church, established in 1850.

On Oct. 4, 1854, the Vacaville Christian Church was formally organized in a schoolhouse (possibly located close to the same location as Cooper School, which was built later on the west end of Cooper School Road) between Vacaville and Elmira with seven charter members. The charter members included Arculus C. Hawkins and his wife Cornelia; James Janes, Thomas Janes and his wife, Belle; Thomas Rogers; and a Mrs. McNear. A. C. Hawkins was elected elder and Thomas Rogers was elected deacon.

The Vacaville Christian Church flourished for the next four years. Outgrowing the cramped quarters of the schoolhouse in 1858, a site was located and purchased for a roomier church building. The location appears to have been in the vicinity of today's Eleanor Nelson Park on the bank of the Alamo Creek. At the time, this area was known as Oilar's Gum Grove.

The members built a frame building, about 60 feet by 40 feet. At the time it was constructed, it was considered one of the best of the Disciples' churches in California.

The ninth state convention in 1863 was held in Oilar's Grove with a crowd estimated at roughly 6,000. A highlight of the convention was Bro. Martin Peterson, who pulled onto the grounds with his "church on wheels." Several parishioners were baptized in Putah Creek.

In 1872 a meeting was called to consider setting up a Sunday school system in the churches of the state. Churches from all over the state sent representatives to the meeting, held in Elmira. Reverend Connell, pastor of the Vacaville Church, was instrumental for having Elmira selected as the site. The result of the convention, with 19 churches represented, was the establishment of Sunday schools in most Christian churches in the state.

In 1872, Elmira was a thriving town of about 500, and the question about where the church should be located arose. At that time Elmira was on the main railroad line, so some church members who resided in town wanted the church building moved to Elmira. But the congregation vote was in favor of moving the church to Vacaville.

It was finally decided that the congregation would divide itself according to choice or place of residence, and 47 members withdrew and established the Elmira Christian Church. As the population of Elmira waned toward the first of the 20th century, the church gradually failed due to lack of members. Services were stopped about 1905, and the building was torn down.

The Oilar's Grove church served the congregation at that location until 1872, when it was moved to Vacaville. It's interesting to note that A. C. Hawkins paid all expenses of moving the church building to town. The old building was used until 1892, when it was decided to construct a new building.

In 1891, a meeting was held to discuss ways and means of raising money for a new building. Later in the spring, property was purchased on the northeast corner of Wilson and Catherine streets.

Rev. Denton presented a building program to the congregation, and it was approved. With \$2,500 in the building fund, a contract for \$4,975 was awarded to George H. Sharpe one month later for the new building, with plans calling for completion in 90 days.

The new building was 58 feet by 62 feet with a 44-by-38 foot auditorium. The pulpit was fronted on the narrow side of auditorium. The church had a 12-foot square tower that rose to a height of 85 feet. It had two classrooms on the east side of the auditorium, connected by folding doors.

The Vacaville Reporter lavished high praise on the new building. Its account of the dedication was begun with, "The dedicatory sermon was delivered by Rev. W. A. Gardner of Woodland, who had visited the church last fall, when they were without a pastor and encouraged them to secure a man at once and renew their efforts to build, for at that time, though considerable subscription had been raised, the building enterprise had been indefinitely postponed. His sermon on the 'Church of Christ' was one of great power and caused all to realize the importance of the church more fully than ever before."

The statement by the pastor during the dedication was as follows: "This beautiful structure speaks for itself. It has been seen by hundreds during its construction and the verdict of all is that they have never seen a house more complete, convenient and suited to the purpose for which it was erected. Here we have a fine auditorium, lecture room and two classrooms, all thrown into one when necessary, and aisles so radiating that there are no bad seats, all in plain view of the pulpit. The windows are obscure without being dark, beautiful without being tiresome to the eye. 'Let there be fresh air and light,' seems to have been the motto of the architect. Graceful angles above, soft carpets beneath, all rooms easy of ingress and egress, plenty of stairs without being too 'stairy,' mahogany-finished chairs for the audience, classrooms for the Sunday School, baptistry and dressing rooms for the candidates, a pulpit and study for the preacher, and above all, an honest job of work done by the contractor, make this building a thing of beauty and a joy, we trust, forever."

Troubled times and dispute over joining a community church caused the congregation to split and lose possession of the building in 1921. Except for a few older members, they met in the Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist and Methodist churches for the next eight years. The old church building eventually was torn down, and it is said that the lumber was used in homes in the Catherine Street area.

In 1929, a new building was constructed and dedicated as the Christian Church on College Street (West side of Andrews Park today). This building was used until members built their current facility on Vine Street in 1965. The College Street facility was used as the College Street Recreation Center until it was demolished in 1974. That facility moved into its new building at the Community Center on Alamo Drive.

Today, after 150 years, the Christian Church enjoys a beautiful site at 66 Vine St. and appears to be headed for another 150 years of service to the community.

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