

Harbison House saw the Nut Tree flourish

By Jerry Bowen

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I drive by the now-empty parcel that once held Vacaville's famous Nut Tree several times a week, and when I see the Harbison House I can't help but wonder what the Allison's and the Harbisons would have to say about what they would see today.

They would have an unobstructed view of noisy Interstate 80 with speeding cars and the factory stores on the old orchard land. At one time the road that passed in front of the Allison house was the old Benicia-Sacramento Road, unusable during the winter. Later, in 1906, the view from the new Harbison house looked upon the new Lincoln Highway, later known as U.S. 40.

What we know as the Harbison House today wasn't the first one built on the ranch. The first house was built in 1855 where the airport is today and a second one close to today's Harbison House.

When Josiah Allison brought his family overland from Ottumwa, Iowa and settled here just three years after Vacaville was established, it was his second trip to California. He had been here once before, joining the many "gold rushers" who didn't do particularly well before going back home. At the time the land was covered with a dense growth of horseback-high wild oats brought to the region by earlier Spanish explorers.

Josiah Allison established one of the early fruit orchards on his 225 acres where he and his wife, Julia Baldwin Allison, raised their seven children including Hester, who was born on the ranch.

In 1858, Josiah wrote to his sister, Mrs. Alpha Brown, her husband and daughter Sallie Fox, urging them to move the family to the ranch. They left for California as part of the Rose Wagon Train in March 1858, with Sallie's stepfather, Alpha Brown, as manager of the group taking the southern route. On Aug. 30, 1858, Mohave Indians attacked the train at the Colorado River. Alpha was killed and Sallie was wounded by an arrow.

The wagon train retreated to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where they stayed until resuming their journey with another group in 1859. During the return trip to Albuquerque and somewhere near today's Seligman, Arizona, Sally picked up some black walnuts and kept them in her apron. She later planted them in Allison's orchard, and one grew up to shelter what would later become the Nut Tree Fruit Stand.

Once the children were raised, Josiah decided to give up farming, sell the ranch and go into business. He moved to Elmira and opened the Allison Store there. The Allison Store was in the same building as the Elmira Post Office and was located alongside the railroad tracks. Josiah remained there until his death in 1895. After his death, his wife, Hester, returned to the home in Vacaville, where she lived the rest of her life with her daughter Hester. She died in 1903.

Before Josiah sold the ranch, his youngest daughter, Hester, married a local nearby rancher, Luther J. Harbison, whose 30-acre ranch was between today's Coffee Tree (now abandoned) and Leisure Town. When Josiah quit farming, he sold his ranch holdings to Luther and Hester, where they raised four daughters, Edith, Julia, Harriet and Helen.

After the turn of the century, Luther and Hester decided to build a new home and hired prominent local builder George Sharpe, who built many of the Buck Avenue homes, to build the house, which was designed by Hester. This was the house we know today as the Harbison House. It was built in 1906 at a cost of about \$6,000.

Hester was an accomplished pianist and held a bachelor's of science degree. The house was of southern colonial style, with the interior planned for comfortable living in all seasons. With temperatures that often reached 100 to 105 degrees, particular attention was given to plenty of cross ventilation in the upper story for quick cool-off in the evening after a hot summer day.

On Edwin I. (Bunny) Power and Helen's wedding day, his father, Edward C. Power of San Jose, gazed up at the Roman Ionic capitals atop the six columns and quietly remarked, "I made those capitals. I remember shipping them to Vacaville to Mr. Sharpe." This was not too surprising, as it was well known that he had executed much of the statuary that graced the courts of the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

In 1921 Helen Harbison Power set up a fruit stand right next to Highway 40 under the oak tree planted by Sallie Fox. Her efforts were fully supported by her husband, Bunny, who set up the stand, placed fresh flowers at each end and erected a flag and made sure fresh water was available for the travelers who stopped to buy fruit. Little could they know then that their meager beginnings would become a landmark that was known around the world. It became so well known that people who didn't know where Vacaville was could easily tell you where the Nut Tree was.

Eventually the Harbison home was given to Helen and her husband. They set up a life estate for Helen's two unmarried sisters, Edith and Julia, who continued to live in the house until their deaths in 1969.

The beautiful old house was witness to years of growth of the Nut Tree Restaurant, as many of us knew it. After opening as a fruit stand, a restaurant was established in 1922. Specialty packaged fruits were offered during the 1920s. In the 1930s a new 200-foot awning sheltered the growing buildings. A flower shop was added in the early 1940s and an aviary was built into the dining room during the same decade. With a new kitchen added in 1949, the facility continued to prosper. In 1952, a toy store was established, and the Nut Tree railroad was added. The paved Highway 40 encroached on the old oak tree, and it finally died in the mid 1950s.

In 1955, Ed Power Jr. realized a lifelong dream by opening up the Nut Tree Airport, and the train was extended to it in 1956. The 1950s also saw the candy kitchen open and the restaurant remodeled. By 1960 the Nut Tree Plaza and bakery was added, and on Nov. 1, 1962, the Nut Tree had its very own post office.

In early 1970, Helen began to restore the Harbison House to its former elegance. Many items that had been so much a part of the house had since been sold or disappeared. Using old photographs of the house's interior, Helen began to replace many of the bits and pieces that had once been in the home. In a stroke of luck, after sending some pictures of the furniture that had been in the house during her grandfather's days to an old friend, Helen Fountain Bailey, she received a reply that she had furniture just like it in her home. A deal was made, and Helen was able to purchase the entire contents of Bailey's home. The furniture was moved into the house in January 1971. By 1973 tours were being given in the stately old house.

The Nut Tree Airport was dedicated to Solano County in 1973, and in 1979 the Pumpkin Patch was in full operation. Over the many years of operation, numerous people added to the greatness of this landmark, including Vacaville's favorite artist, Don Birrell, who was responsible for designing much of the many facilities at the Nut Tree. What a fine legacy he and the Power family was responsible for!

Sadly, by 1996 the Nut Tree was closed, and since then many pending sales have fallen through. Responsibility for the Harbison House was given to the Vacaville Museum. Talk of moving the home was raised and dropped. Many deals and plans for the Nut Tree arose and failed. Then this year, Vacaville's favorite landmark The Nut Tree Restaurant was torn down.

Once again the venerable old home is witness to what lies across the road where the fruit stand once stood. As I write this, today's paper had a new plan for the property, and in the background is the Harbison House. Let's hope it can remain as one of Vacaville's cherished historical structures from our past.

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