

Opera house curtain rose early

By Jerry Bowen

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Over the years, major fires have destroyed many of the old buildings in downtown Vacaville. In reality, many of the early structures would be of little use in today's modern world and in fact probably would be declared unsafe and finally be torn down.

Then again, thanks to past and present city councils, businesses and dedicated citizens, many of our old buildings comprising the Historic Downtown District have survived, are in good condition, serve many useful purposes and provide a reminder of our past history.

One of those buildings is an impressive two-story structure on the southwest corner of Main and Davis streets. Many know it as the Walker Opera House or just the Opera House. Of course, to many of the newcomers to Vacaville, it's just another old building until you learn a little about its history.

Only one other structure has occupied the site since Vacaville began; the Wilson Hotel, built in 1858 by Mason and Luzena Wilson. Luzena sold the hotel to Ike Davis in 1874 for \$6,000, and he renamed it the Davis House.

Amazingly enough, the Davis House survived two major fires in 1877, but was finally brought down by a blaze in November 1888, along with all buildings along both sides of Main Street.

By the following week of that second fire, several businesses had relocated or were busy rebuilding, mostly on the south side of Main Street. The buildings we see today along the south side of the street were rebuilt of brick, and over time, the area on the north side of the street was rebuilt as a collection of wooden buildings and saloons that have long since been destroyed. The Davis Hotel was never rebuilt.

In 1892, an earthquake damaged most of the new business buildings on the south side of Main Street, but they were quickly restored. The lot on the southwest corner remained unused.

Prior to all of the above, Sidney Clay Walker was born in Estill County, Ky. on Jan. 8, 1828. In 1833, his father moved the family to Jackson County in Missouri, where he engaged in farming and saw milling. In 1849, Sidney Walker married Mary Jan Bowlin and worked on his father's farm and in the sawmill until he decided to move to

California.

In 1853, Sidney purchased some stock, loaded up his belongings and crossed the plains to the Golden State with the Frank Williams wagon train. Four months later, he and his family settled in the Suisun Valley, where he worked as a rancher on 325 acres he bought for \$6.75 an acre.

In 1872 he sold his land to Lewis Pierce, purchased a 400-acre tract from the Pena heirs, and joined it to a 320-acre homestead he'd filed for with the government. Over time, he continued adding to his holdings in Vaca Valley until eventually he owned 1,200 acres, most of it along Pleasants Valley Road across from the intersection with Foothill Drive.

At first he only engaged in general farming and stock raising. In 1881, he planted 70 acres in fruit orchard.

By 1886, Walker sold off part of his holdings and moved into the town of Vacaville, where he built a spacious house on the corner of Davis and Catherine streets.

Once in town, he became fully involved with the world of business. He was one of the organizers of the Vacaville Water and Light Company in the 1890s, acting as director for several years. He also served as a town trustee for three terms and as a deacon for the Baptist Church, and was a member of the Vacaville Lodge No. 83, I.O.O.F.

There was previously an opera house in town, known as Bowles Opera House, on the north corner of Main and Davis streets, where Firefalls Restaurant is today. It wasn't much of a structure, was poorly lit and unheated. It never really made the grade as a business and was destroyed in 1895 when 12 businesses and 50 Chinese dwellings went up in flames on the north side of Main Street. It was about this time that a private volunteer hose company was finally formed in Vacaville.

The lot directly across the street from the Bowles Opera House on the southwest corner of Davis and Main streets had been vacant since the fire that destroyed the Davis House Hotel in 1888 and had remained a weed-infested eyesore over the years.

In 1897 Sidney Walker bought the empty lot and began construction of his own opera house. For its time and location, the building was quite grand and stood out as one of the more prominent buildings on Main Street. It was a two-story brick structure with twin triangular false front elements with two urn-shaped finials at each corner of the roof and measured 48.1 feet wide by 125 feet deep.

Since he was a director of the Vacaville Water and Light Company, it was only natural

that he brought electric power into the new building from his utility company. On the east side there were two chimneys, exposed joists and seven windows with an additional seven windows bricked in. Four of the original arched windows on ground level later were turned into doors.

The second story featured a 600-seat theater with a large stage on the south end of the building and dressing rooms under the large raised stage for the performers' use. At what was then the floor level of the raised stage were two double doors that have since been bricked in. The brick patch is still somewhat visible from the rear of the building. There must have been an outside stairway leading to the doors at one time. The stage as it once was has also since been removed.

Opening night on Sept. 25, 1897, featured a grand opening concert. Unfortunately, opera and the arts never caught on in Vacaville back then. Instead, over the next few years, after Mr. Walker died in 1908, the building was used as a movie theater and a general entertainment facility.

The building stood empty for most of the 1920s until the Masonic Lodge took it over in 1929 and used the upper floor until the lodge moved a few years ago to its new facility on Cotting Lane. For a time, the lower floor housed the Golden West Market and other small businesses.

In 1992 and '93, the upstairs was turned into a banquet facility and meeting hall with renovations costing about one-half million dollars. A carpet store, beauty salon, travel agency and land management company occupied the lower floor.

During the renovations, local historian Bert Hughes recorded some of the graffiti on the inside south brick wall before it was covered by drywall. Tidbits such as: "Cake Walker, Nov 8, 1889, Bertha Holmes Cake Walker, Walter Lancaster, Piano Player - Don't forget us," "The Famous Cake Walker, Mabel Sears" and "Twenty Six People, Forrest's Minstrels Walkers" remain hidden from view under the new coverings.

Today Active Lifestyles Fitness Studio occupies the lower floor, and the upper "Opera House" is rented out for various activities, including school reunions, club meetings, weddings and a frequent user, the Vacaville Rotary Club.

With 4,400 square feet of floor space, it has the potential to serve many large occasions for the foreseeable future. We are lucky to have business people and a city council in Vacaville that can care enough to preserve a very visible piece of our past. It speaks well for our community.

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