

Fire in 1909 left Vacaville without a hotel

By Jerry Bowen

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For years, as Vacaville grew during the nineteenth century, volunteer firemen had pressured the town trustees for efficient firefighting equipment, but with little success. By 1908, Vacaville had two hose carts, a town water system with a few hydrants and chemical fire extinguishers strategically placed around the downtown area.

Late in that year a Pacific Insurance underwriter inspected the town's firefighting capabilities. One of the items of concern discussed by the insurance representative was a weakness in Vacaville's water system that could seriously impair its efficiency during a major fire. If power lines that furnished current to the water system's electric pump were damaged it could possibly result in an estimated 80 percent loss of pressure at the fire hydrants.

Over the years, disastrous fires took their toll in the town that was once rich with hotel facilities including the Davis House, the Windsor Hotel and the Miller House. By the turn of the century, Vacaville had only one hotel left. It was built in 1884 and named the Williams, after its builder. The hotel was sold and renamed many times over the years between 1884 and 1909. During those varying ownerships, the hotel's names included the Williams, Western, and then the Brunswick, the Vaca Valley and finally the Raleigh Hotel. It was located where the Old Post Office Seafood and Grill is today.

July 11, 1909, began hot, and only a gentle breeze disturbed the dry air. Sometime during the morning, in what may have been a defective chimney flue, a fire started between the ceiling and the roof and slowly spread between the walls of the rear of the building. G.B. Larose finally discovered it around noon. By then it was burning fiercely and a disaster was in the making.

After spreading the alarm, he and Sam Bentley, each with one of the small chemical fire extinguishers that were scattered in various parts of town, tried to control the blaze. The flames were hard to get at and the small stream thrown by the chemical extinguishers could not reach the source of the flames.

Within a few minutes the fire department had two hose carts on the scene and began the battle against the fire. One hose was taken to the rear of the hotel and another onto the roof, but the fire had such a good start and was so fierce that water could not control it. The hose on the roof was withdrawn because the men weren't able to stand the intense heat. All of a sudden the roof collapsed, causing a mighty ball of flames to

roar skyward.

As the fury of the flames increased, the intense heat melted the only power line running from the power house to the pumps at the wells. It ran down Main Street and directly in front of the hotel. When the pumps shut down there was only gravity flow left to supply water pressure to the hydrants. The pressure at the hoses dropped so much that it left the firemen almost helpless.

Some effort was made to rescue the hotel's furniture, but the flames spread so fast that very little was removed. The piano was saved and the property of some of the patrons, but the great bulk of the furniture was lost.

Realizing it was useless to waste their energies on the hotel, the firemen turned their attention to saving the adjoining buildings.

Just across Parker Street from the burning hotel stood the Presbyterian Church. For a while the firemen thought they would be able to save the church from burning, but the intense heat began to scorch the east side of the church and the water pressure was not sufficient to send a stream to the eaves. The only way to reach the fire was from the roof and Guy Bassett, although not a member of the fire department, George Akerly, and C.E. Lawrence dragged a line of hose to the steep roof. They were able to keep the roof wet and by filling a small bucket with water, Bassett was able to creep to the edge and splash water under the eaves that had begun to burn.

If it had not been for a row of trees along the sidewalk keeping some of the heat from the body of the building, it is probable that no one could have saved the church.

The high steeple soon began to smoke and burn. Unable to reach the fire because of insufficient water pressure, it was feared that the main building still would burn. With this new danger, the firemen redoubled their efforts. Sam Bentley, chief of the fire department, Buck Cline, M.T. Jewell, Frank Costello and B.R. Beard worked their way up inside the steeple, and with a small chemical extinguisher were able to reach the fire to partly extinguish it.

But it wasn't enough. The intense heat began producing its own wind, spreading flames and burning brands throughout the area. Everyone realized that if the church became enveloped in flames, they would soon spread to the parsonage and from there, to other residences. Then it very well may have been impossible to keep the flames from spreading throughout the town with so many wooden buildings on the north side of Main Street.

In the rear of the hotel, across a narrow alley, was a small barn full of hay. Occasionally

the firemen would turn the hose on it. George Crook, with a few helpers, formed a bucket brigade and managed to keep the fire from spreading in that direction.

Diagonally northwest across Parker Street from the hotel, where the Bank of America is today, was the Solano Soda Works. Mr. Larose, owner of the Soda Works, turned his attention to saving his property. Having a good well, he attached his gasoline engine to the pump and was able to keep the roof and sides wet. Reuben Smith handled the hose on the roof and other workers kept the sides wet with buckets of water.

To the east of the hotel, and about 75 feet from the annex to that building, was a row of wooden buildings. The first structure, owned by F.B. Chandler and occupied by E.M. Williams as a residence began to smoke, so men formed a bucket brigade. Frank McKevitt Jr., wrapped in a wet blanket, sprayed water from a small hose onto the side of the building as men passed buckets of water to the roof. It seemed as if the entire town had turned out to help.

A 100-gallon oil tank in the rear of the hotel, about a third full, exploded during the fire. One end of it barely missed striking G.W. Crystal and Sam Bentley, who were nearby. A piece of the tank landed nearly a block away.

Back at the church, firefighters still could not sufficiently reach the smoldering fires in the steeple to entirely extinguish them. They were afraid to wait for the fire to burn down to a point where they could apply water. They could not climb far enough up into the interior of the steeple and any ladder they could use in the close quarters was too short to be of service. Not being able to force the water up to the fire because of the low water pressure, they decided the only way to stop the fires in the steeple was to remove it. In a spectacular show of courage, Guy Bassett, George Akerly and C.E. Lawrence began to chop, saw and kick apart the structural parts of the steeple and finally managed to pull it to the ground with ropes.

The church and nearby buildings were saved, but the Raleigh Hotel burned to the ground. Vacaville was without a hotel and a new one would not be built until 1920 when the two-story, 34 room Vacaville Hotel on Merchant Street opened for business. As luck would have it, that hotel would only last for 16 years when it too was destroyed by fire in 1936. As for the church, it continued to serve Vacaville residents until the 1960s when it was torn down to make way for a Safeway Store. Today, the modified old Safeway building is Gold's Gym.

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