

Helping to preserve Solano County's yore

By Jerry Bowen

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How the past is used or abused can have an important bearing on how a community or county perceives itself. Preservation and promotion of a county's collective past is a logical goal for any self-respecting people. Indeed, pride in the past is seeing resurgence lately as more and more of our precious history is bulldozed under for redevelopment. It takes dedicated people who aren't afraid to work hard in order to set aside some of our precious history in Solano County for future generations.

Members of the Solano County Historical Society always have been involved in promoting the society and providing their own time and expertise to see to it that the society became a reality. The society turned 48 this year and has enjoyed many successes as well as a few setbacks. Though the setbacks have been disappointing, the society considered them a part of the learning process on how to do things better the next time.

The importance of local history came late to Solano County. After World War II was over, military men and women returned to their homes with a deeper appreciation of what they had and many felt their heritage should be protected and preserved.

The College of the Pacific historians were enthusiastic about preserving the local history of all kinds of communities as well as gathering together the history of the ordinary man who planted the crops, raised the beef, tended the orchards, taught school, ministered to the sick, sold the groceries.

On the campus of the College of the Pacific, the California History Foundation and the Conference of California Historical Societies started up and began to help local historical societies get started. It gave direction and encouragement to the preservation and understanding of the heritage of the average pioneer.

Local Solanoans turned to the Conference of California Historical Societies for assistance to start the Solano County Historical Society. An organizational meeting under the direction of Miss Ivy Loeber of St. Helena, president of the Napa County Historical Society and a regional vice president of the Conference of California Societies, was held at the old County Library in Fairfield in 1956. Thirty volunteers from all over the county appeared with Benicia furnishing the largest contingent.

The following officers were elected; Harry Rowe, county librarian, president; M.R.

Wolfskill, Suisun, vice president; LeNoir Miller, Benicia librarian, secretary; and Percy Neitzel, Cordelia, treasurer. The Board of Directors included Madeline Quandt, Benicia; Wes Kent, Vallejo; Rodney Rulofson, Cordelia; George Gorohoff, Vacaville; Beatrice Robbins, Suisun Valley; and Mrs. Glenn Richardson, Fairfield.

After officers were chosen, the group immediately turned to the business of Solano's history and its preservation. The first issue of the "Note Book" was published and issued to members of the Solano County Historical Society in early July 1958. Its purpose was to keep the members informed and publish historical anecdotes and photos.

The society's first project was the acquisition of a museum and headquarters building. A second, longer-term project was to restore the Pena Adobe in Vacaville.

Eileen Minahan chose to work on the museum project. In February 1959 the Board of Directors accepted a gift of the old Herbert House on Virginia Street in Vallejo. The old home was one of the best examples of 1900 architecture in Vallejo. A new location was needed for the house and then it had to be moved.

The first problem was solved when the city of Vallejo offered a 50-year lease for a lot at 1 Kentucky Street that fronted on Mare Island Boulevard.

By April 1959, architects in Vallejo had prepared detailed plans and specification for reestablishing the house and contractors volunteered to supply management, labor and materials to accomplish the relocation. The spirit of volunteerism and pride was flying high in Vallejo.

The Herbert house was moved to its new location and renovation begun. A sizable crew of volunteers readied the building, and by September 1959, it was ready for paint. Colors for the new museum were selected. It was to be white with gray trim and the roof was to be charcoal color, the same as the original colors selected by the original builder. It also sported a small lawn and off-street parking.

Members put out a call for artifacts and historical memorabilia.

The other project; the acquisition of suitable land for the restoration and preservation of the Pena Adobe in Vacaville had been in progress for almost a year. The president of the historical society, Robert Power of Nut Tree fame, headed the committee. The committee had preliminary development plans and an outline of a scheme to finance the project. The adobe was in bad shape and the Sons of the Golden West, Parlor 39 of Suisun, installed a plastic tarp over the building to keep out the rain, paid for with a contribution by the Napa-Solano chapter of the Cow Belles.

Then, in October 1959, a major hurdle was overcome toward the final goal of restoration and opening for public view. Phil and Katherine Mowers and William Goheen, who were the owners of the Pena Adobe and property, granted the "Casa de Pena" to the historical society. The deed officially was turned over to the society during a regular meeting in Suisun in December 1959. The occasion also was used to honor the Goheens and the Mowers who so generously gave the Casa de Pena to the society.

The society continued to have regular monthly meetings in different Solano cities, sometimes taking tours as it did to the Vacaville Medical Facility and to San Quentin. Speakers for the meetings included such authorities as Dr. Glenn Dumke, president of San Francisco State College; Dr. Robert Burns, president of College of the Pacific; Father John McGloin, from the University of San Francisco; Dr. W.H. Hutchinson, from Chico State College; Dr. James Hart, director of Bancroft Library; Dr. Aubrey Neasham, from Sacramento State College; and a variety of speakers from other professional fields. Speakers from the Drake Society also featured interesting speakers because of Bob Power's affiliation with that organization.

Other activities included joint meetings with other historical societies that were highly informative and interesting, especially with Contra Costa and Yolo history groups. Christmas and annual meetings were held at the Nut Tree, the Mare Island Officers Club, the Travis Air Force Base Officers Club, some at the Neitzel home, and once at the Holiday Inn.

In early 1960, Clifford Peterson, of Dixon, sold his ranch. On the ranch was the 90-percent intact 1860-1870 James Porter Blacksmith Shop. The real estate agent who handled the deal, George H. Alcock, recognized the historic value of the shop and suggested to Mr. Peterson and Mr. Murphy that the shop be presented to the society. It was an excellent artifact, but the young society was ill-equipped to take care of it. The society decided to accept the gift and then in March 1960, at a regular meeting in Dixon, gave it on a longterm loan to the Dixon May Fair. Charles McGimsey, on behalf of the Dixon Agricultural Fair Board, accepted the deed to the James Porter Blacksmith Shop in March 1960 on a longterm loan.

Through the efforts of Robert Power, several fine portraits and other manuscript materials were purchased. The society still owns many artifacts, but with the advent of so many local museums it seems that the storage and preservation of such materials would be better served where there were professional staffs to handle them and controlled environments in which to store them.

Anyone wishing to learn more about the Solano County Historical Society or to join the society can write to SCHS, P.O. Box 3009, Fairfield, 94533-0309. Or if you are online, I

would be happy to e-mail you an application.

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