

Efforts are poured into a record of Solano

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last article I discussed how the Solano County Historical Society began and we saw that members plunged into many difficult projects right from the start. In this installment of the history of the society we shall see what progress was made and look at other projects they poured their efforts into.

In June 1960, Superintendent of Solano County Schools, Fred G. McCombs, established a countywide committee to gather and compile historic material for use in preparing a history of Solano County. Members of the Solano County Historical Society were quick to volunteer to conduct interviews, and gather photographs and historic documents for the book.

During the same year the Pena Adobe was still slow in getting to the restoration phase. The California Medical Facility tentatively agreed to use inmates to work on the project. Funding of \$12,000 was still needed for raw materials and the reconstruction director's first year's salary. A skilled restorer, Merrill Curtis, in Sacramento, was assigned and waiting to start the project.

Another effort was under way as historian, Ernest Wichels, then on the SCHS Board of Directors, had prepared documents establishing Mare Island Naval Shipyard as a registered historic landmark. The State of California, Landmarks Commission, Division of Beaches and Parks officially recognized the yard and placed an historic plaque at the Tennessee Main Gate on Dec. 18, 1960.

Construction of the Solano County Historical Society Museum, begun in 1958, was finally completed and ready for its official opening in Dec. 1960. It was the result of many hours of volunteer work and fund-raising. Local communities contributed many artifacts and success was on the horizon. By 1962 the historical society had paid the mortgage down to \$475. The Vallejo City Council paid off the remainder in a show of continuous cooperation with the museum project.

In 1961 the society's archaeological team of Mrs. Helen Newhall and Fred S. Jones III uncovered some unusual Indian artifacts in Suisun and Green valleys. Carbon dating of some of the arrowheads determined that they had been fashioned about 2500 BC. The arrowheads and other items provided the first definite evidence that the Early Horizon cultures had lived in the northern coastal communities of California.

By March 1961 the drive to raise funds to restore the Pena Adobe finally got under way. A goal was set of a minimum of \$3,333 in cash and \$6,666 in pledges. The drive got off to a good start when three service clubs in the Vacaville area - Lions, Rotary and Soroptimists - unanimously endorsed the project and agreed to underwrite a substantial part of the drive. Plans were in the works to solicit funds from other parts of Solano County.

At the same time, members of the Junior Historical Society submitted a display of the Pena Adobe to the Solano County Fair and won a blue ribbon. The Juniors donated half of the \$100 prize money to the Pena Adobe Restoration Fund.

The historical society offered the Pena Adobe and property to the city of Vacaville at a City Council meeting July 23, 1961. The council accepted the deed and ordered the city attorney to draft a favorable resolution for presentation at the Aug. 14 meeting of the council. The following week, the society's board of directors met with the County Board of Supervisors to ask them to join with Vacaville in contributing to the restoration and establishment of the site as a city park, to which they agreed.

The following week the Vacaville City Council appointed a seven-member advisory committee to determine the "historical policies" for the park, which would become the first historic park in Solano County.

Inmates from the California Medical Facility began clearing ground around the Pen Adobe for preliminary inspections and excavations.

At the March 1962 meeting of the historical society, Merle Curtis, restoration superintendent of the Pena Adobe project, reported the clean-up phase of the restoration was nearing completion and the investigative phase was under way.

The Pena Adobe Project wasn't the only work the energetic members of the society had taken on. Other projects included the purchase of large portraits of the Vallejo family so they could be placed in the old State Capitol building in Benicia; designation of the Rockville Cemetery as a historical landmark; acquisition of the historic Hanlon House in Benicia and to assist in the establishment of an agricultural museum in Dixon. By November 1962, the Rockville Chapel was designated State Historical Landmark number 779.

On Aug. 26, 1962, the SCHS held its first "Annual Old Timers Day" at the Rockville Church, a tradition that continues to this day under the name "Pioneer Day." The speaker for the day was Raymond Stone who spoke on the topic, "The Birth of the Bear Flag." More than 400 people from all over the county attended the affair.

In late 1962, the editor of The Reporter in Vacaville, Bill Harris, discovered that new construction of Highway 40 was going to destroy the pioneer Pena/Vaca cemetery on Steinmetz Hill in the triangle formed by today's Interstate 80, Cherry Glen Road and Lyon Road. Representatives of the society, The Reporter, the Division of Highways and a member of the Pena family met on site to discuss solutions to the problem. Several alternatives were discussed, including relocating the cemetery or redesigning the freeway.

Agreement was reached to relocate the graves. In all, 16 graves were removed and relocated to a small hill behind the Pena Adobe, overlooking Lagoon Valley. A plaque dedication ceremony was held during a monthly meeting of the historical society at the Pena Adobe on April 26, 1964.

After 2 1/2 years of work, the Pena Adobe preservation was about half complete in late 1963. Archaeological excavations around the site revealed more artifacts. One very interesting item was found sealed in the building when it was constructed. It was a dried red pepper that was in perfect condition.

Society member Wood Young finished his research of the Pena Adobe in 1964 and published his findings in a series of the society's "Notebook." He also published his work in a hard-cover book in the same year and later again in 1971.

The Hastings Adobe, near Collinsville, was included in a property purchase by PG&E for a power plant in 1965. PG&E advised the society that the plant would not be built in the area of the adobe and that vandals had broken into the house.

The society offered to lease the Hastings Adobe from PG&E for five years with a goal to preserve the historic structure until permanent site plans for the generating plant were completed. The Hastings Adobe was the fourth oldest structure in the entire Valley-Delta region. The older structures were Sutter's Fort, Pena Adobe and the Ide Adobe near Redding, in order of age.

The society then negotiated an agreement with Norman Wilson, a professional historian who was supervisor of Exhibit Preparation for the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, to live in the house on weekends. The purpose was to protect it and archaeologically to explore the site.

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. If you e-mail me put SCHS in the "Subject" box so I can access it from the SPAM filter.

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