

# Community was railroaded into oblivion

**By Jerry Bowen**

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In my last column we saw the beginnings of the new town of Winters and its naming. The Dixon Tribune began reporting the development of Winters as “a flourishing town; on paper ... ” and that several merchants in Vacaville and Dixon would be relocating or opening businesses in the town.

The most significant event that would provide the impetus for growth was the plan for a railroad. On May 1, 1875, the Dixon Tribune reported:

“Surveys will commence laying out the town next week. The grain field, the site of the new town, is being cut this week, on account of the impatience manifested by businessmen. The surveyors are now locating the proposed Berryessa and Winters turnpike. The grading of the railroad is about finished and bridge building and track laying are to be pushed as fast as possible. Already Mr. Ferguson (of Dixon) has a meat market in full blast at the town of Winters ... ”

The Winters Post Office was officially established on May 12, 1875, in a general store, near the northwest corner of Main and Railroad streets and Lorenzo Moody, was appointed the first Winters postmaster. Most of the town lots were sold even before the town map was recorded on May 22, 1875.

Since the new railroad extension north of Winters bypassed Buckeye two miles west of the town, that community's future was doomed. By May 1875, most of the residents and businessmen had made up their minds to move to Winters lock stock and barrel. Many of the buildings were disassembled and rebuilt as new homes and others were pulled on skids by mules to Winters.

As the mass departure continued, the final blow to Buckeye came on Oct. 21, 1875, when the post office was closed. By 1879, only an old cabin that had been the first home of the Benjamin Ely family in 1857 remained. Buckeye was officially a “ghost town.” Building in Winters progressed at a rapid pace during the summer of 1875. Construction of the railroad bridge began in mid-July and 10 buildings received their final coats of paint.

The establishment of a Chinese laundry and the use of Chinese laborers in the grading of the Berryessa wagon road marked the beginnings of an Asian community. Enthusiasm ran high as a celebration of the official opening of the Vaca Valley Railroad

line approached in August 1875. The Vaca Valley Railroad line's new \$11,000 locomotive, the "Ben Ely," was to power a free excursion from Vacaville to Winters as part of the opening day celebration.

Unfortunately, the superstructure of the "Ben Ely" was severely damaged by a fire in Vacaville. The California Pacific Railroad Company came to the rescue by loaning one of its locomotives for the celebration. (The "Ben Ely," later was rebuilt and renamed the "Vacaville," and saw many years of service.)

The editor of the Solano Republican, described "The Trip to Winters," saying, "We made a flying trip to the new town of Winters last Thursday (August 26th), being moved thereto by the polite invitation of the Messrs. Stevenson to participate in the formal opening of the extension of the Vaca Valley Railroad to that point. On arrival at Elmira, on the California Pacific, we found a train of three beautiful cars, manufactured by the Kimball Car Company of San Francisco, in waiting to convey the excursionists over the road.

"Only about 25 or 30 persons were seated in the cars when the train left Elmira; but on arriving at Vacaville ... every seat was filled and large numbers were compelled to stand. Ladies and children in holiday attire, old men and boys crowded into the well appointed and comfortable coaches, the engine was decorated with flags, and every one seemed bent on doing honor to the occasion."

"At this point the train was switched off the old track and onto the new ... in a nearly direct course north, thirteen miles (we soon reached) ... Putah creek, on the northern bank of which is located the town of Winters. The creek is spanned by a bridge 400 feet in length and - although on a level with the banks on either side - 34 feet above the bed of the stream. It is a substantial structure of piles and braces and crossbeams, and neither trembled nor swayed under the weight of the train. The train was halted on the bridge to enable a photographer to 'take' it, and as it moved onto terra firma it was greeted with a salute from an anvil battery (men banging on blacksmith anvils) and the shouts of hundreds assembled to witness its arrival.

"The town at present contains 57 buildings of various kinds, and 30 or 40 more are projected and will be immediately built, now that lumber can be discharged on that side of the creek. Some of the buildings - notably the stores of Mansfield & Theodore and Blum Bros. - would be a credit to any place. There are three dry goods and general stores, one family grocery, six saloons, four hotels, one restaurant, two harness shops, two livery stables, one barber shop, three blacksmith shops, one hardware store, one drug store, one butcher shop, post office, express office, boot and shoe store, and an immense grain warehouse, 270 by 64 feet, filled with wheat. Outside the warehouse is an immense pile of grain said to contain between 9,000 and 10,000 tons. Mr.

Stevenson informed us that it will require fifty cars per day for ninety days to move the grain now awaiting transportation over that road.

"The completion of the road prior to the 19th of September secures to its builders a subsidy of \$30,000; and the road and the town it has brought into existence are an example of what energy and enterprise, where rightly directed, can accomplish, and they will be a lasting monument to those qualities as exhibited in the persons of A. M. and G. B. Stevenson. Long may they live to enjoy the fruits of their labors. ..."

Winters continued to enjoy prosperity as the establishment of businesses, homes and social institutions followed in quick succession and the town's first newspaper, the Winters Advocate, began publication on Nov. 6, 1875. Four churches were serving the community by 1877 as well as several fraternal lodges. A cemetery was already in existence because bodies previously buried in the Buckeye, Wolfskill and Pleasants Valley cemeteries had been exhumed and reburied at the Winters Cemetery. The first citizen of Winters burial occurred November 1876 when Bert Allen died.

Today, Winters is experiencing heavy growth, but the historic center of town continues to remain as a reminder of its interesting past. Unfortunately, the old railroad bridge, with the Yolo County side ending at the Chamber of Commerce doors, slowly is rusting away from lack of any preservation or maintenance.

As for Theodore Winters, he had 12 children, two by his first wife, and 10 by his second. The children from his first marriage were George and Helen, and by his second wife were Frankie, Nettie, Mark, Nellie, Lou, Neva, Maggie, Archie, Theodora and an infant that lived just a short time.

Prior to living in the Winters area he and his brother had made a fortune in the Nevada Comstock Lode and a freighting business known as "The Winters Express." He owned a large ranch in the Carson Valley and indulged in breeding and racing thoroughbred horses.

In 1865, he bought 1,300 acres from Wolfskill and constructed racetracks on both sides of Putah Creek. The climate was not as severe in the winter as at Carson Valley. His Yolo and Solano County properties were also close to racetracks in Sacramento and the Bay Area. He often commuted between his ranches in the Carson Valley and his holdings here.

In 1877, he sold his holdings on the Solano County side of the creek to William Baker, and built a home on the Yolo County property, about 1 1/2 miles east of Winters. The Winters Advocate reported in 1878 that he built a grandstand at his racetrack here to seat 1,100 people. From 1865 to 1890 were the hey-days of Winters' racing stables.

Many famous horses were born and raised in his stables here.

In 1890, Theodore Winters ran for governor of Nevada on the Democratic ticket and sold all of his property here to help finance his campaign. He was soundly beaten in the election. It was a turning point for Theodore because the campaign left him heavily in debt, and he had to sell some of his Nevada property. When, his 17-year-old daughter, Maggie, died in San Francisco of jaundice in 1897, Mrs. Winters apparently lost all interest in life and died in San Francisco on May 30, 1898.

Financial problems continued to mount in Nevada and he lost a series of water rights cases adding to his woes. At a sale of brood mares at the Nevada State Fair in 1899, none of the Winters horses brought more than \$95. Theodore Winters died at his home in the Carson Valley on Aug. 3, 1906. One of his daughters, Neva Winters Sauer, kept the Winters ranch until her death in September 1953.

For those of you interested in the history of Winters, I highly recommend you read, "Winters: A Heritage of Horticulture, A Harmony of Purpose," by Joann Leach Larkey. The highly researched book is well-written and easy to read.

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