

# **Township began with Mormon colony site**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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In 1843, Lansford W. Hastings arrived in California and soon became a promoter attracting emigrants to the West.

His book, "Emigrants Guide to California" published in 1844, was responsible for some of the early emigration to the state. Unfortunately, his route, the "Hastings Cutoff" was somewhat controversial and misled many early travelers, resulting in hardship and even death.

Early in 1846, Hastings was believed to have become an agent responsible for finding a site for a Mormon colony. Choosing an area in today's southeastern Solano County on the Sacramento River, he built a four-room adobe in anticipation of a large land grant from the Mexican government. However, the Bear Flag Revolt changed his grandiose plans.

Abandoning the adobe house, it remained uninhabited until 1852, when a series of owners occupied it until PG&E bought the land around 1964. The old, abandoned adobe still stands, but is rapidly deteriorating because of a lack of maintenance and a badly leaking roof.

The Montezuma Township, along with several other small communities, rose and fell in this corner of Solano County.

## **Collinsville**

The first permanent settler in Montezuma Township, as it was then called, was L.P. Marshall. He moved into Hastings' adobe, named it the "Montezuma House," and lived there for the next quarter of a century.

In 1859, Mr. C.J. Collins settled on government land where Collinsville now stands. He surveyed the town plat and built a wharf and store.

In 1861, George W. Miller was appointed the first postmaster. Collinsville soon became an important shipping port for hides and tallow.

Collins sold the property to S.C. Bradshaw in 1867. Bradshaw, after changing the name to Newport, began a promotional scam on a grand scale. A total of 29,000 lots were laid

out (many of them under water at high tide) and potential buyers were assured that in less than three years their lots would be worth thousands of dollars. But by the end of two years, Bradshaw's project had failed. The scam was discovered and most his holdings went to Emory Upham at a sheriff's sale in 1869. Upham changed the name of the town back to Collinsville.

Under Upham's leadership, Collinsville added more docks, a telegraph, hotels, general stores, saloons, a salmon cannery, and various other merchant and trade businesses. Built on stilts to avoid tidal flooding, the town was booming by the 1870s.

The principal enterprise was the cannery and when commercial fishing started to fail, the town began a long spiraling decline. Collinsville suffered another blow when PG&E's plans to build a nuclear electric plant nearby failed to materialize.

By 1963, only six homes were occupied. Along with the shells of a few abandoned buildings, it appears that is where Collinsville stands today.

### Birds Landing

Before the town was established, the Bird's Landing site, located a little north of Collinsville, was called Montezuma Crossing and served as a grain shipping point for John Bird. Arriving in Solano County in 1865, Bird bought 960 acres from Emory Upham and built a grain and dairy business. Four years later, he constructed a blacksmith shop at Montezuma Crossing.

The town site at the intersection of Collinsville and Birds Landing Roads was founded and named after John Bird in 1876. Serving as the first postmaster, Bird circulated mail from the post office located inside a general store, which was built in 1876 by Moses Dinkelspiel and Jacob Frank of Suisun City.

Adolph and Morris Dinkelspiel bought the store in 1878, and four years later Adolph sold his half-interest to John and Henry Bird Sr. Now known as the firm of Bird and Dinkelspiel, the new partners continued the policy of buying products from the local ranchers and added liberal discounts.

The Landing's first school, Willow Spring, was built in 1876 and the Shiloh Church was raised about three miles west on Collinsville Road. Directly behind the church is the town's cemetery where John Bird and other pioneers of Solano County are buried.

The town hall, built in 1882, became a meeting place for Lodge No. 284 of the Independent Order of the Odd Fellows and a dance hall on Saturday and Sunday nights.

The town began to grow in the 1880s with continuing prosperity until a disastrous fire in the early 1930s. The general store was spared and in 1921 when John Bird passed away, his sons, John Jr. and E.G. Bird, sold the store to Mr. and Mrs. Chris Benjaminsen. Mary A. Bird, the post mistress, arranged for the appointment of Mrs. E. Benjaminsen to the office.

After owning the blacksmith shop for many years, John Bird sold it to Bill Kennedy, and in 1900, he sold it to Bert R. Blackwelder.

Blackwelder became a successful businessman and was well-known throughout Solano County, where he established the Blackwelder Manufacturing Co. of Rio Vista. In the 1930s his company invented and manufactured one of the first sugar beet harvesters.

The store and a saloon, owned by the Paolini's, had become a regular stopping place for duck hunters and fishermen by 1950. The bar walls served as a trophy wall with photographs depicting many of the large fish caught in the Delta and Montezuma Slough.

The locals experienced a brief brush with fame when Broderick Crawford and a cast of others came to Bird's Landing to film portions of "All The King's Men."

Birds Landing may yet have a chance to shine once again when the Western Railway Museum on Highway 12 finishes its track laying project, which will culminate at Birds Landing. The current storeowners, John and Leona Benjamin, (John is a descendant of the Benjaminsens) are in the process of restoring the historic building.

Across the intersection from the store, the bar has already been refurbished and is open for business. Perhaps the town is destined to prosper once again and tourists can board the old trains and visit this little historical vignette of Solano history.

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