

Railroad fire changed face of Suisun in 1906

By Jerry Bowen

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With all the disasters flooding the news, I might as well add one more, although it's nowhere near on the scale of Hurricane Katrina. It happened in 1906. No, this story isn't about the San Francisco earthquake on April 18, 1906. That was already old news, at least for the local folks.

Around 3:40 a.m. July 24, 1906, sparks from one of the cars of a Southern Pacific Railroad train passing by the Armsby Fruit Packing House in Suisun landed onto a loading platform.

It isn't known how long the platform smoldered before it burst into flames, but it had gained a good deal of headway before being discovered.

Before the fire department had time to arrive on the scene to fight the fire, raging flames had leaped from the packinghouse to the company's office building. A strong wind blowing from the southwest rapidly spread the flames to the Southern Pacific depot and a house at the corner of West and Solano streets, occupied by Dr. D. N. Mason and family.

Burning embers and shingles from the roof of the packinghouse and home then began scattering to the residential section of Suisun bounded by Solano, Common and Main streets. With many wooden homes built close together, it was inevitable that flames fed by the high winds would begin to erupt all over the area. It wasn't long before it became evident that little property could be saved.

With so many hydrants open at the same time, the flow of water was too low to be effective. Suisun's old hand engine was brought into play and was able to furnish two streams of water that was of some help.

With the flames quickly spreading beyond the control of the small Suisun Fire Department calls for assistance went out to the neighboring communities of Fairfield, Benicia, Vallejo and Vacaville.

Southern Pacific Railroad soon supplied special trains to bring fire equipment from Benicia and Vallejo. The Fairfield Hose Co., under command of Chief T. V. Corcoran, was first to arrive because it was nearby. The train from Vallejo brought a steam fire engine, and the Phoenix Hose Co., under the charge of Chief George Andrews, made

the run to Suisun in 30 minutes, setting a record run. The steam fire engine was placed at the foot of Solano Street so it could pump water from the slough. It was able to supply a strong stream of water and was instrumental in checking the raging flames on the north side of Solano Street. Members of the Solano lines Company of Benicia and fire fighters from Vacaville soon arrived supplying valuable support to the effort.

Southern Pacific's Road Master, William Tobin, arrived in town at a critical moment with his crew of 135 Japanese workmen, and operated the hand engine as well as forming log bucket brigade.

Efforts of the firefighters were concentrated in preventing the flames from crossing West Street, south of Solano Street, to the homes of Mrs. Carrie Saunders and A. C. Tillman. They were able to keep the fire back from these buildings, although the roofs caught fire several times. Had the fire not been checked at this point, the entire section of town bounded by California and Solano streets probably would have been destroyed. By keeping water on the buildings on the south side of Solano Street, the flames were confined to the north side of this street and were finally stopped near to the home of J. T. Cooper, which was partially destroyed. North of these buildings, however, everything was destroyed west of Suisun Street except for a handful of private homes.

In the end, the fire burned everything on both sides of Sacramento Street up to Suisun Street, and on the north side of Sacramento Street to Common and Main street. In addition, the flames destroyed everything north of Sacramento Street and east to the slough, including the steam laundry, W. Cerkel's feed mill, G. F. Taylor's bottling works, Henry Bird's new creamery and a greater portion of the lumberyard owned by the Suisun Lumber Co. The office building of the lumber company was saved, as was also the Chinese laundry owned by Quong Sing, Z. T. Spencer's furniture store and adjoining properties on the west side of Union Avenue north of Common Street.

In all, about 30 dwelling houses were destroyed, together with several barns, besides the manufacturing establishments named above. The old cannery building occupied by the Alden Anderson Fruit Co. was saved, although it was in imminent danger several times. George Paul's icehouse and coal shed, nearby were also destroyed.

It was painfully evident that the Suisun Fire Department could only handle small fires and was unable to cope with a fire of such magnitude. Discussions after the fact revealed that a plant to pump water from the slough would be a practical solution as well as buying a modern fire truck and other remedies.

After the fire was out insurance companies were quick to arrive, assess the damage and to pay up on claims.

Apparently the Southern Pacific Railroad owned the property that the Armsby Fruit Packing Co. was located on and would not renew the lease for the business to rebuild there. For a time, the Armsbys considered moving their business to Vacaville. In a spirit of cooperation, enterprising citizens of both Fairfield and Suisun persuaded the company to locate to Fairfield on the east side of Union Avenue across the street north of the Ernst Lueuning Packinghouse. The cost of the new packing plant was estimated to be between \$15,000 and \$20,000 and soon contractor Fields of San Francisco arrived in town to begin construction.

It must be said that the spirit and attitude of the Suisun residents and businessmen was of the highest caliber. In an August 3, 1906, publication of the Solano Republican, the headline boasted, "A New And Better Town Will Soon Arise From The Ashes." The headlined article stated, "The disastrous fire which swept over Suisun Tuesday afternoon of last week destroying over forty buildings, causing a loss of \$200,000, and leaving many people without homes, while distressing, as such always are, did not carry away with it the confidence the people have always had in the town. Here is perhaps, more buoyancy in the spirit of the people of Suisun at this time, only ten days since the fateful day, than there was before the fire. Real property in the burned district is actually worth more today than it was on the morning of July twenty-fourth. This statement is borne out from the fact that many of the residences, which were erected in the early days of Suisun, were antiquated and had become unsightly. While it is true some modern residences and a number of business enterprises shared the fate of the buildings of much smaller value, the town is left in a condition to be built up on a better and more attractive scale. A new and better town will arise from the ashes. Greater Suisun is the by-word everywhere."

Suisun remained a center of business and activity for a long time after. Perhaps that attitude is something we can all learn from knowing the past and learning from it.

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