

# Dusty memories and a castle on the hill

By Jerry Bowen

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Ghost towns are often the essence of dreams of adventure. They conjure up dreams of tumbleweeds rolling down a dusty street, doors hanging askew swaying in a whimsical breeze and decaying buildings embracing the memories of a population long since gone.

Well, perhaps my statement is a little melodramatic, but, Fairfield does have the remnants of a “ghost” town within its confines that is seen, in part, by commuters that travel Interstate 80 between Fairfield and Vacaville. Many still ask today about the “Castle on the Hill,” as did James Davis of Fairfield last May.

The town of Cement had a short life span, rising in 1902 and gone by 1927. It was a company town created on 900 acres of land owned by the Pacific Portland Cement Company and had a population of 800 to 1000. Pacific Portland built the town for \$500,000 to mine and manufacture Golden Gate brand cement.

For the men and women working in the company’s facilities it was hard, dusty, dirty work; digging, grinding and mixing the raw materials and finally shipping cement throughout the world. Many could not stand the powder-fine particles which clung to them. Employee turnover was high, with many of the disgruntled complaining about the constant dust. It coated the hillsides and clothing and hardened when it rained. According to one former resident, they could peel it off of their clothes and body.

When the mill and the dozen 60-foot kilns were first built, the men worked 12-hour shifts and by 1910, apprentices earned \$1.75 a day. One of the more notable projects supplied by the facility was 80,000 barrels of cement for the construction of Mare Island’s dry-dock facilities.

Cement had its own post office, park and ball diamond, fire station, meat market, power plant, ice house and schoolhouse. Two rows of red, wood-frame houses lined the town’s two main streets. A hotel sat on a corner and housed the single men who ate in its restaurant. Some families earned extra money by feeding the bachelors. A hospital stood nearby, ready to treat the sick and injured.

The hospital was often in demand by the offspring of the residents. For recreation, the children would indulge in hazardous quests for enjoyment. According to Ruth Kilkenny during a 1981 interview, she said, “they would take corrugated tin sheets and bend the

front back, then put ropes through holes they punched and use them like sleds. All too often they would run into trees or other solid unmovable objects. Mothers seemed to be constantly running the adventurous kids to the hospital.” Other risky “fun” was to roller-skate up to a concrete slab on top of one of the hills and see how close they could come to the edge.

Fresh water for the citizens of Cement, was supplied by wells drilled in Vacaville and pumped to the thirsty town. In later years, the wells were filled in with rock and gravel. During heavy rainfall in the 1950s, they were “rediscovered” when the gravel washed down through the rock. Fences located between homes on Pine Street and today’s Grocery Outlet (the old Vacaville Grocery store) collapsed into the widening holes according to local historian Bert Hughes.

The company owned and operated a ranch on the property and supplied meat for the company’s butcher shop and milk for the residents. Cement even had it’s own currency or script for use only in company stores.

Cement’s school was only for the lower grades. Students going to High School rode a rail line connecting Cement to Tolenas. From there students walked to Fairfield and Armijo High School.

The Golden Gate Hotel itself was probably one of the county’s more notable buildings. Cement’s annual dance, held at the Golden Gate Hotel was numbered among Solano County’s grandest affairs. Five dollars would buy a full-course dinner and a night of dancing to a live orchestra.

The first Golden Gate Hotel burned to the ground in 1906. The second hotel was two stories high with a veranda running across the front of each story. A park landscaped with pepper and acacia trees fronted the hotel. Boxing matches, known as “Smokers,” were hosted by the Pacific Portland Cement Company at the hotel drawing thousands of spectators into town.

When the original mill ran out of nearby material in 1917, a new facility and office were built south of town closer to another source of minerals. The first company office was converted into an auditorium and used for a school, town meetings, church and traveling shows. Once in a while “drummers” (traveling salesmen) would come into town and set up movie equipment in the auditorium for anybody who could afford a dime.

Then came the day that many knew was inevitable. The available supply of rock and clay was exhausted and the company was forced to close down. The company sold its holdings for \$100,000, offering to transfer any employee to the company headquarters

in Redding who wished to move. A few remained for a while to supervise the town's demise, watching over the abandoned site as buildings were hauled off by buyers. Most of the houses were moved to Fairfield and Vacaville and the larger structures were dismantled and auctioned off.

A few of the houses are still in use today including the only two-story home in Cement. At the time, it housed Chief Chemist, Charles Wheeler and is now a private resident located at 247 Taylor Street in Fairfield. Two houses were moved to Vacaville onto the 500 block of Davis Street and still serve as private residences.

Today, 73 years after its closure, little remains of Cement. The shell of the power plant, a rock crusher, the hotel's foundation and a few foundations remind us of what was once a flourishing town. The rock crusher machinery foundations remains are possibly what travelers on I-80 see today and cause them to wonder if they are a "Castle on that hill."

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