

## **Vacaville destroyed in year's second inferno**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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In the early days of California it was common for hastily erected towns to be destroyed by fire. Homes and businesses were built close together and usually out of wood. The cost and importance of fire protection was ignored until a disaster happened. Occasionally, after a particularly bad fire, a town would slowly fade away and disappear if it didn't have a good reason to rebuild.

Vacaville was no different when it came to looking ahead at the need for fire protection.

After the fire of June 6, 1877, people began to rebuild. They had a good reason to do so because the Vaca Valley Railroad provided a base of support for future growth of the developing fruit industry. Without the railroad, Vacaville might have become just another footnote in a history book.

Swift payoffs by insurance companies provided the capitol for some to recover from their losses and to rebuild. More fortunate friends and neighbors helped some of the uninsured citizens recover. Vacaville quickly rose from the ashes and just as fast ignored planning for future fire protection.

Oct. 10, 1877 - four months after the fire that destroyed half of Vacaville, its 300 residents went to bed secure in the knowledge they would wake to another reasonably trouble-free day.

About 2 a.m., a fire was discovered in an old barn belonging to Arthur Moore in the rear of the general merchandise stores belonging to Mansfield & Theodore Company and Blum. Shouts of fire roused the sleeping population, but before anything could be done, it began engulfing other buildings on Main Street and leaped across the road. Vacaville's sleepy citizens looked on in helpless disbelief as the hungry flames destroyed everything in sight.

Except for the Davis Hotel, not a building was saved in the business portion of the town. Goods, furniture and buildings were destroyed in the relentless fury of the fire which later was thought to be the work of an arsonist. Blum, and Mansfield & Theodore, suffered the greatest loss. Mr. Blum had the largest stock of goods in the county. The next heaviest losers were Dr. Tillson, Dr. A.W. Vance, Dan Corn, Mrs. Wilson, and Dr. Cunningham including G.P. Plaisted who, after rebuilding since the last fire, decided to wait until he received a full stock of goods before getting insurance.

The Weekly Solano Republican headlines reported, "THE FIRE MAKES A CLEAN SWEEP THIS TIME - Loss Estimated at Over \$250,000 - All the Large Stores and all the Business Portion of the Town is in Ruins."

The list of damage was lengthy for such a small town: Lyons & Ash, saloon, loss \$2,000, insurance on buildings and fixtures; J. Blum, brick store and two warehouses full of goods, loss \$100,000, partially insured; Mansfield & Theodore, brick store and goods, partially insured; Dr. A.W. Vance, drugs, loss \$3,500, insured for \$2,500; A.P. Bernard, frame building, loss \$1,500, no insurance; Dr. Cunningham, furniture, loss \$600, no insurance; D. Pena, frame building, loss \$1,200, no insurance; Arthur Moore, frame building, loss \$1,000; Shaw, shoemaker's material, loss \$500, no insurance; Mrs. Shaw, millinery establishment, loss \$1,000, no insurance; Thomas Kinsmill, saddle and harness material, loss \$1,200, insured for \$800; Squire Gray, frame building, loss \$1,000, no insurance; Squire Gray, dwelling, loss \$500, no insurance, Howard Lewis, furniture, loss \$400, no insurance; Arthur Moore, barn, loss \$200, no insurance; Daniel K. Korn (Corn), livery and feed stables, loss \$3,000, insured for \$2,000; G.P. Plaisted, general merchandise, partially insured; Squire Ward, store, frame building, no insurance; Dr. J.D. Tillson, building and stock of drugs, loss \$4,000, partially insured; Charles Losee, frame building and furniture, loss \$1,500, no insurance; Mrs. Wilson, frame dwelling, loss \$1,200, no insurance; Ben Long, furniture, loss \$300, no insurance; Mrs. Wilson, dwelling house, loss \$1,200, no insurance; Fred Wooderson, furniture, loss \$500, insured; Henry Noel, dwelling house, loss \$1,200, total loss.

The insurance companies quickly settled all the claims except for druggist, A.W. Vance who was suspected of being the arsonist because he was over-insured. He was arrested on charges of arson but later released for lack of evidence.

The town began the task of recovery and by the end of the year was once again in business. The need for fire protection once again was put on the back shelf.

Three years later, the women of Vacaville conducted a drive to raise funds to buy fire extinguishers in the hopes that the men of the town would form a hook and ladder company. But apathy continued. A few feeble attempts to raise enough concern among the citizens to establish some kind of fire protection were met with little enthusiasm.

When two large fires struck Vacaville in 1888, The Vacaville Reporter lamented that there was no fire department or equipment to stop the flames. But apathy prevailed.

In 1890, a fire cart consisting of a barrel mounted on wheels was built and an attempt was made to purchase three more. More fires hit Vacaville in the same year but the weak attempt at fire protection failed.

Finally a meeting was held in 1890 by the town's leading citizens. A fire company was formed and arrangements were made for a supply of water to fight fires. A hose cart was purchased and volunteer hose companies were organized. After 13 years of indifference, more serious fires, and higher insurance rates, Vacaville was finally in the fire protection business in a small way.

It was a beginning and despite tireless support of volunteer firefighters, many more years of politics, apathy, and lack of funds would hinder reaching the goal of a reasonably valid system of fire protection. It wasn't until the 1920s that the town's trustees would finally fund the fire department, but that is another story.

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