

Population lifted off after airfield built

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Construction of the Fairfield-Suisun Army Airfield in 1943 brought a large number of new residents to the local communities, doubling population overnight. Calls went out for rentals and vacant rooms with only minimal results. With the base scheduled to open soon, personnel stationed there would bring their families as well.

At the same time, construction material was difficult to obtain. Most was designated for the war effort. Fairfield, Suisun and Vacaville turned to the Federal Housing Authority to ask -for funding to help construct permanent housing for the incoming troops.

On June 10, 1943, the Solano Republican announced that the Public Housing Authority had approved 316 dormitory rooms and 160 family units to house "war production workers, including civilian employees at Ragsdale Field (as the Airfield was known at the time), Mare Island, Benicia Arsenal, Hunter Boat Works, Fairfield Textile Works and the S. P Company.

"The proposed units will increase the population of this immediate community by more than 1,500 residents, it is estimated."

In addition, more than 70 family dwellings would be constructed north of Fairfield. A government architect provided the plans for this building project. It was to be located on the northern edge of the city of Fairfield and adjacent to the Sacramento Northern railway right-of way (today's Webster Street).

On July 1, the paper said: "The original which, has been slightly revised, calls for 40 four-family dwelling buildings and five dormitory buildings, three intended for occupancy by women and two for occupancy by men. It is assumed that all of these people will be employed at the Army Air Base or in the plants of the Fairfield Textile Works, the Hunter Boat works in Suisun, the Southern Pacific Company or the Basic Vegetable Company in Vacaville.

"The buildings will be arranged on a loop road around a play area in such a manner as to provide the most pleasant and practical living facilities for the occupant." Additional dormitories were planned but had not yet received clearance.

The unusual layout of Fairfield's first subdivision received special mention. "The off angle arrangement of buildings is intended to take advantage of the summer winds

making the buildings more livable in the warm season,” the article continued.

The Fairfield City Council voted on a name for this new subdivision, proposing to the National Housing Authority that the name of the new project for defense housing unit be named ‘Waterman’ in honor of Capt. Robert Waterman who gave this city its town site back in the 70’s. The request for a name for the new project came from Omer Mills, assistant director for management of the Federal Public Housing Authority.

By July 22, all projects were under way, or, as David Weir phrased it in his opening statement: “A two-ring circus’ is coming to town next week!”

Leekins and Davis began construction of 44 of the planned 75 houses “on the former B. B. Wing property south of the Grammar School (Ohio Street) and on the Emma G. Ivory lots, formerly the Flatley property east of the Bunney hospital on Empire Street (between Kentucky and Great Jones).” Mr. Leekins estimated that the first units could be completed within a four-to six-week period.

The Lawrence Company was in charge of the construction north of Fairfield. The initial phase included 48 buildings with a cost estimate of \$451,689. “In the unit will be 40 buildings of four family apartments each, a total of 160 apartments; two dormitories to house 36 men each; three dormitories to accommodate 48 men each; one community building with a cafeteria, and an infirmary, all for the use of the residents of the project, and to be known as the Waterman Addition.”

Work progressed rapidly. By Aug.15, foundations were ready, “and many of the six-room dwellings already have floors laid and the frame- -work will be started before the end of the week.”

By Aug. 26, Leekins and Davis felt certain that the first units would be ready within two weeks. Only defense workers could rent for the time being, but “Contracts to purchase these homes after the war may be signed now, it is understood.”

The Waterman Addition progressed equally fast and was expected to be ready by Nov.15, 1943.

I will continue this story in my next column.

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