

## **Suisun's early years ripe with growth, drama**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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In my last column, Suisun was incorporated and officers were elected in 1868. By 1879, nearly 10 years had elapsed before the railroad traversed the tule marsh on the direct route to Benicia. Ballast hauled onto the soft peat ground sank from sight time after time, although hundreds of trainloads were deposited. The sink would appear to be filled and work on the track started again, when suddenly the surface would give way, and the tracks would disappear.

Formal education started in Suisun in 1856 with a private school taught by Miss Bell Barton. On May 6, 1863, the Suisun elementary school district was established.

It was on a lot north of the site of Crystal School (now demolished). A high school was begun in 1875 on the upper floor of this building. Non-residents of the district were charged \$20 tuition for a term of five months for this higher education, which was furnished by reading rooms in the more elite bars of the period, all equipped with books, chairs and spittoons.

Although other rooms were available to rent, the Pacific Hotel located at the northwest corner of the Plaza was the first true hotel. Later, it became the Roberts Hotel, owned by Mrs. Margaret Roberts. It was later named the "Arlington."

The original Arlington burned in 1888 when an inferno destroyed eight city blocks.

After the blaze, the hotel was replaced by a new Arlington Hotel on the same site. Another hotel, the City Hotel, managed by S. A. Shorey, also rose from the ashes of the conflagration. Both businesses enjoyed a prosperous period in that decade.

Early circuses played Suisun after the railroad came in 1870. The Zoological Equestrian Exposition in 1873 advertised that one would see "strange kangaroos, zebras, ibex, a baby elephant and a drove of Bactrian camels" all for a dollar. Two years later, the Queens Circus came with the only giraffe in California.

Going down to see the trains come in was a form of early entertainment for nearly thirty years. Sunday band concerts, featuring local talent were held in the plaza, weather permitting, and nearby saloons were well patronized on any occasion they could dream up as noteworthy.

On the other side of the saloon crowd was the Beulah Encampment of the Champions of the

Red Cross that was organized October 21, 1871, with 25 charter members.

It is interesting to note that this organization was then a temperance movement and not the Red Cross we know today.

The Nov. 9, 1879, issue of the Weekly Solano Republican carried local business cards by local doctors (MDs). Competitive advertisements extolled the virtues of patent medicines that cured consumption and all ailments of the human race. One frank claim for a product stated "multitudes are rescued from premature graves by its use."

Walker's Vinegar Bitters, sold to cure boils, gout, kidney and liver diseases stated the following: "\$100 reward will be given for any incurable case provided the bones are not destroyed by mineral poison or other means, nor the vital organs wasted beyond the point of repair."

On Feb. 7, 1876, lumberyard man Reul Drinkwater Robbins, with a capital stock of \$100,000, chartered the Bank of Suisun. Eleven years later, the bank advertised a surplus of \$127,114 and was paying a dividend of one percent a month on the capital stock, indicating the loans had been made only on good security.

By 1878, five physicians, three dentists and three attorneys had established residence there.

The attorneys were Assemblyman Joseph McKenna, County Judge John M. Gregory and George A. Lament. The known physicians were Dr. W. G. Downing, S. D. Campbell, A. P. Spence, Gil. Evans and C.P. McGettier. Dr. J. F. Pressley was in charge of the county infirmary (known as the poor house) established in 1876 in the Tolenas area.

The dentists in the city were W. H. Robinson, B. A. Eaton and W. C. Harding.

I'll continue with the story of the early days of Suisun in my next column.

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