Suisun City’s Early History full of Drama

By Jerry Bowen

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Suisun was a fast growing town from the 1870s to the 1890s. Loads of marble passed through Suisun from Judge Swan’s marble quarry located about seven miles north of Suisun at Tolenas Springs en route to San Francisco. A few of the old Suisun families had 40-pound clocks encased in the marble. The mineral water there was bottled and sold, along with sarsaparilla in the bars of the period. The Indians called the springs “The Land of Healing Water.”

Suisun Valley, with its fast-increasing deciduous fruit tree plantings on rich soils, supplied prosperity to the city on the slough. Fresh fruits could be shipped by rail to distant markets and Suisun was the shopping spot and post office for the Valley.

Patriotism was celebrated each Fourth of July by the citizens of the thriving city. Flags and tricolor bunting ornamented the business houses on Main Street. Activities were mostly centered in the plaza. Local orators who were selected because of their ability to wave the flag in magnificent speeches always populated the bandstand. A band, horsemen, carriages and the Union Fire Company No.1 with its man-powered engine usually led the parade down Main Street. The line of march was down Main Street to Line Street, then east to Main, down to Morgan Street and back to the plaza where the orations were delivered. Firecrackers were plentiful as the Chinese Laundries used them for New Years celebrations. A Grand Ball with a full committee for introducing gentlemen to the ladies finished the day’s celebration.

But as time went by, there were events that eventually led the beginnings of the downward trend of the thriving city.

An 1888 fire destroyed every building north and near the plaza, including the Arlington Hotel. The railroad depot and the prosperous Chinese laundries along North Main Street burned in spite of the best efforts of the men of the fire company. Rebuilding in the city, including the reconstruction of the Arlington Hotel progressed rapidly until 1892. Then an earthquake caused more alarm than damage to Suisun. One newspaper account said, “at 3 a.m., on April 22, a severe shaking of the earth caused terror among the sleeping citizens of this place. When morning came, those who had threatened to leave California that night immediately changed their minds.”

The Native Sons Hall and the Masonic Hall suffered interior cracking of the plaster, and in the case of the latter, the front walls showed minor cracks. The new Arlington’s
windows were broken, as were the dishes of many homes. No lives were lost and total damage was estimated at $500. By comparison, Vacaville estimated damage from the quake at between $150,000 and $200,000 after shaking down brick buildings injuring some inhabitants, but killing no one. Suisun, being built on marshy ground, survived in better fashion than the, neighboring city.

The “gay’ 90’s” produced a select gentlemen’s club called the Armijo club - possessing its own building. It was used later for dances by the “Honk Em Cow Club,” and later became the city hall and firehouse. Today it is an apartment building that still shows some of its original architectural features.

At about the same time Fairfield began to sprout homes and business houses and soon became the center of society. A frame building for the Armijo High School was erected there in 1893. The mile-long plank sidewalk from Suisun was kept in good repair until well after 1900. Fairfield was incorporated as a city in 1903 and automobiles were then unknown. In spite of this upstart competition, the pioneer Suisun long maintained its heyday appeal for the valley folks who continued to journey there to do their business and banking and to receive their mail for a number of years.

But, over the next century Suisun lost much of its glory to another fire in 1906, decay, loss of business and crime. But a renewed sprit has gripped the old section of town as it once again is showing off as a fine waterfront business and historic district. Who knows, maybe someday Suisun City will once again outshine the city of Fairfield as it did long ago.