

## **Benicia Tannery was one of the state's best**

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

Saturday, June 21, 2008

During the 19th century, canneries and tanneries formed the core of Benicia's economy. The earliest tannery, the Pioneer Tannery, was founded in 1864 and underwent several changes of ownership. Within a short time period others followed, creating a cluster of tanneries.

In 1869, Robert Shaw opened the Shaw Tannery. This tannery changed hands in 1873 to be operated by Charles Moore and Fred Cummings. Unfortunately, the complex burned down that same year.

According to the "History of Solano County," compiled in 1879 by Munro J. P. Fraser, "The new firm had hardly got in good working order, when the whole establishment, in a few short hours, was destroyed by fire. This was a severe blow to the young men composing the firm; but Mr. E. Danforth, an old resident of Benicia, having confidence in their business qualifications, skill and enterprise, furnished them the means to build and conduct the tannery now owned and run by them at the foot of First street."

The new establishment was renamed the Benicia Tannery and developed into a large operation covering two acres of land. It included a three-story high currying shop, drying rooms, a bark-mill and an immense bark shed that held up to six hundred cords of tan bark. The tan bark was brought in every fall with an estimated value of \$10,000.

The Benicia Tannery produced 18 different kinds of leather, employed between 30 and 40 people and had a payroll of more than \$2,000 per month.

"Mr. Chas. Moore attends to the business department," said Munro Fraser, "and Mr. Frank Cummings to the mechanical department. The latter gentleman is a manufacturer of some twenty year's experience in the Eastern States, where he acquired a thorough and practical knowledge of making all the finer grades of leather; such as glove kid, Russia, pebble goat, shoe, buff and leather for satchels or bags. To him for the skill and to Messrs. Brown & McKay (owners of the Pioneer Tannery) for the enterprise, is the State indebted for adding these to the wealth of California manufactures."

On arriving in California years prior to owning the Benicia Tannery, Frank Cummings visited nearly every tannery in California. He hoped to introduce his knowledge of manufacturing these specialty leathers, which until then had to be imported from the

East Coast at high cost.

"His efforts were fruitless until he met with Messrs. Brown & McKay, who were clear-headed enough to see the advantage and profit of making leather in California, and had the pluck to run the risk of the experiment. The result was all that Cummings claimed, and all that Brown & McKay expected. It soon gave Benicia the reputation of being the hub of the tannery interest in the State."

The booming tannery business not only impacted the local economy but also the environment.

Both the dried hides with clinging remnants of meat and fats, as well as the tanning bark liquor created to cure them, carried a distinctive odor that permeated much of the small town. Hordes of flies accompanied the wagons that brought the hides to the tanneries.

The tanneries needed immense amounts of fresh water. While this was originally pumped from local wells, the amounts needed soon outstripped the resource.

The need for more water led to the creation of the Benicia Water Company on Oct. 10, 1879. The Paddy Ranch and Sulphur Springs Creek sold the first water rights. This was followed by construction of a dam in 1880 and the creation of a reservoir on Kaiser Hill. Other reservoirs, quickly followed at East Third and W streets. The total amount of water that could be stored reached 1.5 million gallons.

Pumps began to operate on June 25, 1880.

I will continue my story in my next column.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/412>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/412/>