

Waterman Park provided answer to wartime housing

By Nancy Dingler

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Shortly after the beginning of World War II, the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Field was created. With it came construction workers who were housed in hastily erected "tar paper" barracks. As the war progressed, the mission of the airfield changed from reconnaissance to flying troops and supplies to the "Pacific theater" in our war against the Japanese.

This new mission brought in hundreds of people to the new base. There was not adequate housing for these "war workers." Something had to be done. The call went out for residents of Fairfield, Suisun and Vacaville to open their homes.

Trailer parks sprang up overnight, as well as a tent city. These were stop-gap measures to handle the emergency. By July of '43, bids went out for the construction of a brand-new community. The proposal was for 40 four-family buildings and five dormitory buildings for the unmarried workers. Waterman Park was born.

In January of 1943, Tom Smith went before the Fairfield City Council to seek permission to use city property west of Fairfield for a trailer base.

Initially, the proposal was for 40 trailers with a view toward adding 100 more as grading and utilities were completed. The City Council granted the 2 acres, without cost to Smith, to solve the problem of trailers parked on county roads and farm plots, which were deemed to be a health hazard.

By February, the county supervisors approved the construction of a 6-mile road from the county seat to the new airfield, needed because of the huge increase in traffic.

A name change came about for the airfield in June. It was changed to Ragsdale Field to honor Lt. Ragsdale, who piloted 30 women and children from behind enemy lines in New Guinea. He shot down "five of the twelve Jap zero fighter planes that attacked his craft. He landed his human cargo safely, but gave his life in the heroic execution of his task."

In April the U.S.O. put out a local plea for houses, apartments and rooms need for the married Army men who were scheduled to arrive soon. W.W. Woodard, proprietor of Woodard Chevrolet Garage, was the U.S.O. chairman. Because the U.S.O. did not have a phone yet, Woodard encouraged those interested in doing their part for the war

effort to call his home or business phone numbers: "315 or 136."

The federal Public Housing Authority and J.C. Hoffman of the Construction Department submitted plans to the city of Fairfield for the construction of a new community in July 1943 on 25 acres, next to the Sacramento-Northern Railway right-of-way.

The city council wanted to name this new community after Capt. Robert Waterman. In reply to this request, the letter from the FPHA specified that the name adopted by Fairfield could be a matter of federal record and would be placed over the entrance to the new project.

"The buildings will be arranged on a loop road around a 1 1/2-acre play area in such a manner as to provide the most pleasant and practical living facilities for the occupants." The buildings would initially consist of 40 buildings with a total of 160 family apartments and five dormitories to house 216 men.

A tenant activity building, 117 feet by 40 feet, would be erected to provide a community meeting place and a child care center and cafeteria. The total project was estimated to house 856 new residents - "a city half the size of the present city of Fairfield."

"The area is to be nicely landscaped, with trees, shrubs and lawn, and will extend from Jackson street to Great Jones and north for a quarter mile. Later, it is understood, the project will include all the land west to Pennsylvania Street with housing to accommodate many more families."

At the same time that the huge project at Waterman Park was commencing, the private firms C.W. Leekins and Stanley Davis were preparing to erect the first of 44 houses out of a proposed 75 to be built on vacant lots inside the city of Fairfield and Suisun.

"While the houses may be rented only to defense workers at Ragsdale Field, the Southern Pacific Co., Fairfield Textile Works and Hunter Boat Works, the project will take the pressure off present meager housing facilities."

By the end of October 1943, it was estimated that families could start moving into the new Waterman park buildings by Nov. 15. The contractors had difficulty at first finding enough carpenters because of the war. Now, working on the project were 100 carpenters, 14 plumbers, nine utility men and four laborers. With this infusion of workmen, the modern cafeteria, barber shop, hospital, library, recreation room and superintendent's quarters would be ready.

"One of the unusual features of the project is the new 'Transite' water mains, a new composition of asbestos, with a tensile strength greater than iron and with the new

'Teigle' joint, making it possible to install the water system in a third of the time. The project will use Suisun water from the big reservoir high up on Twin Sisters mountain."

By March 1944, 100 additional houses were proposed for Waterman Park; then in July the Waterman Clipper was launched. There were two pages in the Solano Republican devoted to news and activities of Waterman Park, edited by Winifred Jewel. As Waterman Park was a community within a community, the newspaper became a newspaper within a newspaper.

Waterman Park thrived through the '50s. But, by the late '60s, it had become old and tired. No longer centered west of town, it had been swallowed up by Fairfield. The city council decided to bulldoze the wartime project to build a new civic center. Put to a vote in November of 1968, the voters overwhelmingly approved almost \$4 million in bonds for the construction of the new civic center. By 1971 the present-day civic center was dedicated.

Waterman Park became just a footnote in history as a gallant wartime commitment, held in fond memory by those who had lived there.

Special thanks to Evelyn Magee for bringing this story to our attention. It took a bit of digging to piece the story together. I had hoped that residents of Waterman Park would have photos. Alas, that was not so. Unfortunately, the city archives are also empty of such recordings. This is just another reason for needing a local county museum, so that memories such as Waterman Park can be preserved for future generations to learn about the achievements of the past.

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