

## Architect known for beauty, elegance and aesthetics

By Nancy Dingle

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The front page of the Sacramento Bee on Dec. 2, 1937, told of the grim and untimely death of one of the architectural stars in California's firmament, William E. Coffman. A.R. Robertson, W. E. Coffman Die in Crash - Cement Salesman, Architect Hurled From Car on Road to Jackson" the headline read.

A speeding automobile failed to negotiate a turn on the Jackson road near Michigan Bar yesterday morning, hurtled out of control, and almost instantly killed William E. Coffman, 45, well-known Sacramento architect and A. Robert (Bob) Robertson, 58, cement company salesman," the story read.

"Both men's skulls were crushed as the car turned on its side and rolled over and over for 90 feet. Robertson, owner and driver of the car, was hurled from the machine as it turned over. Coffman was also tossed out as the car careened into a field near the Sacramento-Amador county line 30 miles east of Sacramento." It was a sudden end for a man who built one of Solano County's marquee buildings.

Coffman was born in Chico on Nov. 4, 1891, the son of William Coffman from Pikes County, Mo., and Carrie Hale Dubois of Illinois. He went to live with his aunt and uncle, Mr. And Mrs. Tom Brophy, on their ranch west of Corning for a while.

In his short 46 years he completed a body of work that was truly astounding. When he was just 17 years old, he went into business with his brother, George. They opened a carpenter shop in Chico.

It was there that young Coffman invented a surveyor's measuring device and a folding ironing board. Later, he would build, design and install colored glass windows in the new church on Bidwell grounds, the first of its kind in Chico.

Coffman was a member of the 117th engineers during World War I and was considered one of the "Sacramento Boys." Coffman received the presidential citation for the construction of a bridge that was used in the attack on Fort Sudan. He was awarded several campaign ribbons for his heroic contributions to the war effort.

Coffman decided not to return "home" right after the war. He stayed on in France to attend the Academie des Beaux Arts de Paris. When he returned to Chico, he threw himself into one project after another. One of his very first tasks was to design and build

the first junior high school in Sacramento: Stanford Jr. High.

Sacramento boasts the “fabulous forties,” which is an area of elegantly designed homes in the \$1 million-plus bracket. It is referred to as the fabulous forties because of the street numbers, from 40th street to 48th. Perhaps one of the most well-known residents of the area was Gov. Ronald Reagan.

Julia Morgan, architect of the Hearst Castle, has several homes to her credit, as well as the arts and crafts masters, Green and Green. Among these stellar architects are Coffman-designed homes. Prominent among these are the homes located at 1126 46th St. and 46th and N streets.

Another area of upscale homes is around the Land Park area. The house at the end of Land Park Drive that resembles a ship is one of Coffman's creations.

Coffman went on to design the Pierce Union High School in Arbuckle and the Fort Bragg High School. He designed the Esquire Theatre on K Street as well as Andronico's Restaurant at Folsom and Alhambra. One of his last masterpieces is the famed Tower Theatre. After his death, his mother and aunt were invited to attend the dedication.

In 1925, one of his crowning achievements was the design of the Eastern Star Temple in Vallejo, which is on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

In 1931, Coffman won the contract to design the new Solano County Free Library. He carefully listened to the wishes and desires of the librarians who were hoping for a building that would reflect California's historic Spanish heritage.

His design thrilled the selection committee and won the hearts of the librarians. As he had throughout his career, Coffman paid attention to the details. One could walk into one of his homes, restaurants, schools, theaters or public buildings and be delighted by the beautiful little touches.

As in the case of the library, which is now referred to as the “old library,” and in spite of time and other uses of the building, those details are still gloriously in evidence. The main door greeted visitors with carved ornamentation above the archway.

The foyer is adorned with hand-painted Spanish tile and wrought iron balustrades for the staircase, as well as a hanging chandelier. The great room is truly great. One can imagine the row after row of polished oak book shelves and the reading tables rich with patina from use.

Today, the room is bare of these essentials with the exception of the giant hand-hewed oak beams painted ever so delicately with Spanish motifs. Light streams through the windows, which used to have ornate grills on the outside.

At the far end of the great room is what appears to be a reading room, for it has a wonderful "beehive" fireplace creating a cozy place to spend many quiet hours engrossed in a good book. Today, the Solano County Historical Society is earnestly pursuing placing this wonderful structure onto the National Registry of historic buildings.

The building was dedicated in 1931. In 1934, the citizens of Solano County unveiled the statue of Chief Solano near where his grave is purported to be - close to the Solano Community College campus.

Unfortunately, being at such a remote site, oversight and protection of the statue was impossible, so vandals were able to shoot off the head feathers and take an ax to one of the feet. The artist, William Gordon Huff, repaired the foot, but it was decided by the county supervisors that the statue should be moved to a safer locale. Upon the news of Coffman's death, Solano County decided to move the statue to the library grounds to honor his memory. His widow, Luella attended the somber event.

Coffman will always be tied to Fairfield and Solano County for his contribution to the beauty, elegance and aesthetics that is the "old library."

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