

A new city in search of sewers

By Nancy Dingler

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FAIRFIELD—It all came down to sewers. When members of the Fairfield Improvement Club gathered in the proverbial smoke-filled room to talk about installing a new sewer system and other improvements the night of Aug. 18, 1903, they kicked off a process that ended with the creation of a city almost 100,000 people now call home.

The club would have attracted the most prosperous, prominent and successful farmers and businessmen in Fairfield. They probably would have arrived by horse drawn carriage or on horseback. Being August, unless the famous Suisun wind arrived, they were probably in short sleeves.

As the meeting continued, it became increasingly apparent the only right way to accomplish a sewer project and other improvements would be to incorporate the town. Under the umbrella of the county government, they could form a sanitary district, but the sewer system would be the only improvement possible, and they wanted to do a lot more than sewers.

The new century inspired them. The steam engine had changed transportation. More than 1 million miles of telephone lines criss-crossed the country, making communication instantaneous. Indoor plumbing, oil-fired stoves and electric lights were changing homes. They needed the infrastructure to support all these “new fangled” improvements.

Members first discussed incorporation at the Aug. 10, 1903, meeting. Now, it seemed quite apparent it was the only way to go, providing enough voters agreed. County Auditor Bert Sheldon presented tax amounts each property owner in the county now paid and then compared costs of incorporation. Incorporation wouldn't raise property taxes over the legal limit of 75 cents per \$100 of value. At the most, incorporation would raise taxes 35 cents. Sheldon based his figures on the possibility a sewage system would cost at least \$15,000.

An engineer also came to the meeting prepared, estimating the project could cost \$10,000. He offered to make more precise estimates for the club for free.

In the meantime, other members of the club had informally surveyed townspeople about starting a city. Many favored incorporation, especially if it would lead to making improvements without too great a cost. The improvement club held a public hearing on

the issue Aug. 25, 1903. Club president J.M. Fix led the session, with Will C. Wood acting as secretary.

Only a few people came, but they supported incorporation. Attorney W.U. Goodman told the group it needed a petition signed by at least 50 registered voters who lived in the township to start the process. The petition would then go to the county Board of Supervisors, which would order an election.

One selling point was that once the township became a city, the people could then organize a fire department, a huge necessity at a time when most homes and businesses were made of wood. Property owners had to pay an insurance rate 35 percent higher than if there were any organized means of extinguishing fires. People also wanted sidewalks and street repairs, the same improvements Suisun City had started when it incorporated.

The group next met Sept. 1, 1903, when members learned about a snag in the process. According to F.L. Morrill, the petition process couldn't begin without clear boundary lines for the proposed city. Morrill reported two or three well-known property owners in the western part of the town opposed the idea and didn't want to be included.

But the group settled that problem by the end of October and started circulating the petition.

Although they only needed 50 signatures, 60 eligible voters signed. On Nov. 2, the club presented the signed petition to the Board of Supervisors, which approved it and set an election for Dec. 5 at the schoolhouse.

In addition to the question of incorporation, voters were also asked to approve city officers - H. M. Brown, H. A. Shorey, Josiah Wing, H.C. Sheldon and F.S. Gurnette as trustees; W.E. Hammond as clerk; R.D. Smith as treasurer and T.J. Lenahan as marshal.

Though confident an overwhelming majority of voters would approve incorporation, the club decided to publish an informational circular which said, in part:

“Do you think it would be better for the town to collect the licenses which are at present collected by the county, and from which you receive no benefit whatever? Do you not know that if this town were incorporated, a great many more people would come here to live? That they would want to buy lots and build houses, and that would make more work, more trade, more money? It would make your property more valuable and be a benefit to everyone.”

On Dec. 11, 1903, The Solano Republican announced on the front page the result of the special election. Out of 142 votes cast, 77 supported incorporation. Nine ballots were thrown out on account of illegal marking.

Officially, incorporation took place on Dec. 12, 1903, and Fairfield has not stopped growing and improving since. Little could the members of the Fairfield Improvement Club fully realize on that sweltering August evening what impact incorporation would have.

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