

## **Driving force behind newspaper - and lavish fair**

**By Nancy Dingler**

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David A. Weir was unquestionably a man of boundless energy, drive and ambition. The publisher of the Solano Republican (Daily Republic's forerunner) during the 1920s through the '40s, he became the promoter of everything Solano County.

From a local historian's point of view, Weir's most important contribution was his book about Captain Waterman, the founder of Fairfield. His title, "The Magnificent Captain Waterman," was a bit over the top and some of the "facts" may be in dispute, but it is the only compiled history on Waterman and if one is fortunate to have a copy, it is a great resource.

The year 1930 marked a special event: The Solano Republican would be 75 years old. Weir, the consummate marketing guru, had a brainstorm. In celebration of the newspaper's anniversary he would promote a countywide fair to bring attention to Solano County and subsequently to bring attention to his newspaper.

Weir originally envisioned an agricultural-themed exhibition, showcasing the best the county had to offer, but the more he thought and expanded on the original idea, the more grand and elaborate it became. In spite of the fact that usually these things take a year to plan, he only had five or six months.

On Dec. 5, 1929, a newspaper headline announced "Solano County To Attract Thousands to Great Fair." The fair was to be titled "Bells of Solano County Exposition" and the proposed dates were May 24 to June 1, 1930.

The location where the fair was to be held, approved of by the county supervisors, was across from the Solano County Courthouse, in a vacant lot bordered by Texas, Jefferson, Union and Missouri streets. (It's now occupied by the new county government center and the "old" library.)

The gigantic and spectacular fairgrounds would be brilliantly illuminated and would feature a products show, farm and home appliance show, style shows, food shows, art and educational exhibits and a proposed junior livestock show along with a motor car and truck show.

The Fireman's Club, located at the time at the corner of Texas and Jefferson Streets, would be where the style shows were to be held. The club would be transformed into a "gorgeous blue and gold room."

As the hoopla around fair activities grew and grew, it was almost eclipsed by tragedy. On Sunday afternoon, Dec. 8, Armijo High School caught fire and was almost completely destroyed. The second floor of the building held the public library, which also suffered the same fate.

After the initial shock of the tragedy, Weir felt he had to recapture the interest of the public and refocus attention on the celebration.

Weir felt contests would generate the most excitement. He was tireless. Contestants would vie for the most elaborate pageant play, a signature music composition and a popularity contest among the young ladies of the county for title, "belle of Solano County." Pageant plays were all the rage. Every community had no trouble in finding people who wanted to plan and participate.

Weir was confident of his grand plans. Sheriff John Thornton was the fair chairman, but Weir was clearly the driving force who would bring the plans to fruition.

On April 10, 1930, it was announced that the popularity contest had not only elicited countywide interest, but attracted the interest of people throughout Northern California. No doubt, the lucrative prizes offered to the winners of the contest caught everyone's attention.

A Hudson sedan, "a beautiful late model automobile" was to be given to the first-prize winner. "Happy indeed will be the Belle who is to receive the first prize," the newspaper article read.

In addition to the car, the first-prize winner would be expected to represent Solano County, which included a trip to New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlantic City, Chicago and "other points of national interest."

The second-prize winner would get a trip to Honolulu, while the other contestants would win radios, diamond rings and cash. The young ladies who wished to compete would be judged through a public vote during the fair. "Entries are coming in every hour and the starting bell for the big campaign will sound any minute," so crowed Weir in his editorial of April 10.

Each contestant needed to collect a minimum of 5,000 votes to be able to take part in the first round of elimination, which took place on the steps to the county courthouse. A large crowd of onlookers, including newspaper reporters and moving picture cameras, documented the contestants.

"The girls were all specifically costumed, representing Greek and Roman mythological

as well as modern characters.” The initial field of hopefuls was a pretty good number from all over the county. Representatives from Dixon, Vacaville, Fairfield, Suisun, Benicia, Vallejo and even Grizzly Island vied for the grand prize.

However, gathering 5,000 signatures was no easy task and as the deadline loomed, contestants began to drop out. To put a spin on the outcome, it was announced that at the fair, each town would put on its own show. The fair was to last a week, so each town within Solano County would get their day to feature the young lady or ladies and to elicit last-minute votes. Of course, Fairfield garnered the most contestants.

In the meantime, the ambitious fireball, who inspired others to achieve lofty goals during the short time frame, announced on April 10 that the winners in the contest for a signature music composition had been won by well-known musicians Val Valente and George Dalbier.

“On Sunday evening and again on Tuesday evening, over radio station KFRC, of the Don Lee system, a far-reaching broadcast of one theme song and orchestration by Val Valente and George Dalbier, coming from the Roof Garden cafÃ...Â½, San Francisco, brought The Belles of Solano County Exposition to the attention of tens of thousands . . . Val Valente and his band would play the winning composition and a concert during the fair.”

As if this exposure was not enough, Weir pushed the exposition staff to hire a famous writer to put Solano County on the map. Gilbert G. Weigle, a very well-known feature writer at the San Francisco Examiner was persuaded to join the effort to publicize the county, its fair and the 75th anniversary of Weir’s paper.

The first countywide fair was a great success and was attended by a huge number of people. Weir’s vision became a reality.

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