

Save historic places before it's too late

By Nancy Dingler

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This column marks an anniversary. Six years ago, it made its first appearance and has appeared once a month ever since.

And six years ago, parts of the county hospital on West Texas Street were being used to house county departments.

The building, designed by Vallejo architect William Perry was declared by an architectural expert to be a fine example of 1920s architecture. Now it's gone.

And the last remnants of Cement City will soon be only a memory in photographs - photographs not readily available to the public.

A historical park was suggested by Fairfield politicians but it remains to be seen if anything happens. What was once a thriving industrial community, whose electric light glow could be seen for miles around, is on its way to disappearing completely from the historical fabric of Fairfield.

The old Cordelia school is also in jeopardy. It caught fire, severely damaging the roof. The property owner assured members of the Heritage Council and the Historical Society that the roof would be repaired to maintain the integrity of the building.

Unfortunately, this has not been done and now the building, on the California Registry of Historic Sites, is in sad disrepair and threatened with destruction. The Cordelia Homeowners Association is attempting to prevent this disaster.

Most folks do not know that one of the first industrial businesses in the county was flour mills that sprung up in the 1850s during California's wheat boom.

One of the largest water wheel driven mills was located in Green Valley. It was constructed of stone by George Dingley and stood three stories tall. The 40 foot wheel dwarfed St. Helena's Bale's Mill with its 36 foot water wheel.

During an ownership dispute, the mill burned down. The remnants of the Dingley mill, thankfully, still stand. Too bad it has not yet been restored, as the St. Helena folks did with the Bale's mill. The new owners, I am happy to report, will keep it safe from total destruction.

Local folks got together several years ago to preserve and restore Gomer School, replete with inkwells. A prodigious amount of artifacts have been collected, which are proudly displayed throughout the building. Phone calls can arrange visits and fascinating stories of life in a rural school house.

The old stone Baldwin Barn, constructed of the same local stone found in Dingley's mill, Rockville church and Granville Perry Swift's home, is now under the protection of the Rockville Cemetery.

The Goosen Mansion on Empire Street stands as a glorious tribute to hard work and luck. Henry Goosen was part of the German "ZmigrZ" colony in Suisun. He worked hard and rose to prominence, owning a hardware store and the local water works.

Unfortunately, fortune did not smile on him personally. All three of his sons died prematurely and without children. His wife, the widow Kate, established an orphanage. The stately home would become a private hospital, then transformed again into Fairfield's mayor's house and afterward a bank, before being restored by Mary Mancini and Anthony Marino.

Granville Perry Swift's home in Green Valley became the country club. One can observe the original home from new additions. Granville walked to California from Missouri in 1843 with his good friend, Frank Sears (Sears Point).

Granville was a heck of a shot, being the grandnephew of Daniel Boone. He went to work for Sutter as a hunter and participated in the Bear Flag Rebellion. Later, with his sisters and father, would go looking for gold along the Feather River and find a fortune.

He built two mansions, one in Napa and one in San Francisco. Lost his shirt with poor investments, his wife divorced him and with what was left purchased the Harbin house, which is now called the Green Valley Country Club.

The Waterman home, built by Fairfield's founding father, ship's Captain Robert Waterman, has been exceptionally restored as a private residence. The original buildings; barns and outhouses still stand as well.

Rush Ranch is still going strong. The home, that Senator Benjamin Rush lived in is gone, but the barn and blacksmith shop remain. The state has a paid ranger and public tours can be arranged. The Lucas Foundation (yes, George) has funded documentaries.

There is a very vibrant group of docents that are eager to share their expertise and knowledge.

The city of Vacaville, recognizing the value of tourist dollars, has not only sparked up the historic old town Vacaville, but is now turning it's attention to preserving and renovating the Pena Adobe at Lagoon Valley.

The Penas and Vacas were one of the first families to settle in Solano County at the urging and support of General Mariano Vallejo.

Which brings me to Fairfield's crown jewel, the old library building. Thanks to the efforts of concerned citizens, the building was saved from demolition. It seemed like the stars had aligned to bring about a long sought Fairfield based museum, at Solano County's seat of government.

The building was vacant and in great condition. It does need some work to convert it into a museum, where all the artifacts and mementos that are languishing in garages, closets and attics would finally have a safe place to be exhibited.

Californians passed Proposition 40, where millions of dollars would be made available to art, history and cultural entities.

There would be three opportunities to submit a grant application to be considered a recipient. A group of interested citizens formed, among them expert grant writers.

Unfortunately, the county owns the building. They have to submit and approve any and all grants. So, the grant that was submitted asked for cultural funds for a possible museum, and a possible office building.

Naturally, the grant was denied on the first round. The county decided it would not submit a rewritten grant without the office building designation, for the second round.

There is one more opportunity to get the funds in June. A lot of people are hopeful, but if the past is any indication, it does not look good.

One of the sticking points, which is not talked about, but I am sure the county is perturbed by, is the city of Fairfield.

Fairfield has endorsed the museum, along with the Fairfield Downtown Business Association, the Fairfield/Suisun School District and all the civic organizations.

Time and money has been pledged, by everyone but Fairfield, who would also benefit - as does Vacaville with its historic projects.

Politics, unfortunately is heavily intertwined with the museum project, and right now, it

does not look good for the old library to become a museum. It would sure be a shame if the museum project died and the building as well. We can only hope that the county will "do the right thing."

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