

Happy anniversary to those who keep the past alive

By Nancy Dingler

Saturday, June 17, 2006

And of course, members celebrated, inviting lots of people. Harry Rowe, the founding president of the society in 1956, attended. He, along with “older” members of the group, recalled the early days.

He recalled how with Rodney Rulofson and newspaper columnist and historian, Wood Young, came to found the society with the purpose of keeping the past alive and preserving the tangibles that remain.

To document the society’s activities and achievements, Young instituted the Notebook, containing the society’s planned activities, current achievements and little history vignettes, which is still sent out to members several times a year.

Throughout history, societies have “re-discovered” their past. During the 1930s, the great historical awakening centered on the Native American history. During the 1950s, the College of the Pacific (Stockton) established a Library of Western Americana focusing on California.

California’s three great historical libraries, the Bancroft (Berkeley), Huntington (Pasadena) and the State Historical Library in Sacramento, have diligently preserved state history. Because these libraries needed large budgets, emphasis fell on the most popular periods of California history: The Mission Period, 1949 Gold Rush, immigration and the national economy.

What historians wanted to do was to preserve local history of the ordinary people who through their efforts, brought about the changes we benefit from today - in other words, they wanted to fill in the periods of history that were being ignored.

In addition to the new Library of Western Americana, the California History Foundation and the Conference of California Historical Societies were established. The organizations were specifically developed to help local historical societies get started. It gave direction and encouragement to the preservation and understanding of the heritage of the average pioneer.

It was this group that the local Solanoans turned for aid in getting started. Help was immediately available in the person of Ivy Loeber of St. Helena, president of the Napa County Historical Society and regional Vice President of the Conference of California

Societies.

One of the first ambitious projects for SCHS was to acquire a building for headquarters. Eileen Minahan, school teacher and author of "The Story of Chief Solano of the Suisun Indians" (1959), chose to work on the building project. The old Herbert House on Virginia St. in Vallejo was available; however it had to be moved.

With cooperation from the city of Vallejo PG&E, local businesses and craftsmen, the home was moved to One Kentucky St., with frontage also on Mare Island Boulevard. The Herbert Home was a late Victorian style, two and a half stories with room for exhibits, office space and storage.

A sizable crew of volunteers spent two years readying the building. The museum was ideally located, charming, a good place for small socials and board meetings and committee activities, as well as housing many treasures. A grand opening was held, but soon problems developed.

Even though there was good cooperation, the staffing of the museum became difficult. By 1969, the officers and board members decided that it was too large a project for volunteers. There had been two episodes when vandals had entered the building and caused severe damage.

As a result, the possessions and artifacts were taken to Vacaville where they were stored in the old city jail, where the Heritage Council now resides.

One of the society's first tasks was to research and restore the deteriorating Pena Adobe in Vacaville, one of the earliest known structures in the county. Due to disinterest and recent neglect, the adobe has fallen into disrepair once again and once again it is going to be rescued.

In 1964 Wood Young wrote a history of the adobe. He would go on to prepare the documents designating the Rockville Stone Chapel as State Historical Landmark No. 779.

In December 1989, the first Solano Historian rolled off the presses, thanks to the efforts of husband and wife team, Matthew and Lee Fountain. The goal was to "stimulate the enjoyment and preservation of history by publishing pictures, stories, articles and letters furnished by its readers."

The Fountains saw, what many see so clearly, the knowledge of the past that is lost each year because "those who might save it either do not realize its value or lack the motivation to take any immediate action."

The California Conference of Historical Societies honored the Fountains in 1989 with Award of Merit for initiating the editing of the Solano Historian. Copies of the biannual magazine can be found in the local public libraries.

If anyone wants to purchase current and back copies, they can be obtained at museums throughout the county. For Fairfield residents that will mean a trip to the Vallejo Maritime Museum or the Vacaville Museum.

Members of the society rescued old Solano County documents and established the Solano County Archives situated in Fairfield. Volunteers "man" the archives for the public on Tuesdays and Fridays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. The storage facility is not the most ideal conditions under which to store fragile documents, but it beats the landfill, which is where they were heading.

The historical society saved the Old Town Hall/Jail, in Vacaville, from destruction. The Heritage Council, with its thousands of photos was established by Bert Hughes, a tireless and knowledgeable historian.

Hughes received the California Conference of Historical Societies Award of Merit in 1991 for his unceasing efforts in preserving history. He was elevated to president of the SCHS 1994-95. His daughter, Judy Lopez, a teacher with the Vacaville School District, served as president from 1995 to 1997.

The California Conference of Historical Societies also awarded newspaper columnist, Ernie Wichels, the Award of Merit for his column, Pages of the Past in the Vallejo Times Herald and co-authoring with Sue Lemmon their book, "Sidewheelers to Nuclear Power," as well as his contribution to the Notebook.

The society was involved in the preservation of the James Porter Blacksmith Shop, now on loan for the use in the yearly Dixon May Fair. They also assisted in the establishment of the agricultural museum in Dixon.

The society has been heavily involved in supporting the group to bring a museum to Fairfield. They were instrumental in preserving the old library from destruction with the hopes that this now vacant building would house, at last, a museum in Fairfield.

Best wishes and happy anniversary to a great local organization that continues to fight for the preservation and memory of those who have contributed so much to the lifestyle that we all enjoy today.

Note: To join the historical society, write to: Solano County Historical Society, P.O. Box 3009, Fairfield, Ca. 94533-0309. Dues per individual are \$20/year. Or contact the

president, Mary Higham, at MaryLHigham@aol.com.

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