

The Lawler House sits next to the Harbor Theatre in downtown Suisun City.

By Nancy Dingler

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Lawler house: Local landmark nearly lost to ravages of time.

One of Solano County's most beautiful historic homes sits on Main Street in Suisun City - the Lawler house.

The stately building has found a home next to Harbor Theatre in the heart of downtown on Main Street. But it wasn't always so.

Sometime around 1857, the original, large two-story ranch house was built on the Suisun prairie, south of what would become Highway 12. Records of the original owner have been lost.

The remaining records show that a family named Swan lived in the house as early as 1869. In the early 1870s, George Ellsworth bought the home. Ellsworth, originally from New York, arrived in Solano County in 1854. When Ellsworth died in 1888, he left the Lawler house and ranch to his wife, S.M. Ellsworth. He also left her two wagons, two double harnesses, one buggy, 21 head of cattle, 32 hogs and poultry.

S.M. Ellsworth married into the Field family in 1895. According to notes taken during a phone conversation with the son of E.E. Brownell, Mary Higham, president of the Solano County Historical Society, learned that Rachel Field (1894-1942), author of "All This and Heaven Too" (made into a movie) was a relative of the Field family and visited the house in the early years as a young lady.

The Fields sold the ranch to the Brownell family in 1932. The Brownell Ranch became a huge cattle and sheep operation. Edward Erle Brownell was a doctor in San Francisco. He had married Sophia, heir to the Pope and Talbot shipping and lumber dynasties. The ranch was a lucrative investment. Edward and Sophia were part of the glamour and glitz of San Francisco society.

William F. McFadden was hired in 1914 to manage the ranch. He moved his wife, Freida, and daughter, Edith, into the spacious home. The large ranch grazed sheep on the north side of Highway 12, while cattle roamed the marshland south of the highway, along Grizzly Island Road.

In 1947, John Lawler purchased the more than 2,000-acre ranch from the Brownells. John and his wife spent weekends and vacations at the ranch house. Upon purchase, John had the old ranch house remodeled to reflect a more genteel architecture. The two-story home with its first floor porch roof was eliminated. The house was transformed to reflect the Italianate style of the 1870s, similar to that of Mount Vernon.

After the transformation, the house would become known forever as the Lawler House.

The first festive occasion after the remodeling was the wedding reception of Joan and Bill Frost in 1948. The Frosts were friends and neighbors of the Lawlers, the family having lived in the Grizzly Island area since 1919. Joan Frost would write and publish a book about Grizzly Island history in 1978, the only history book to have recorded photos of the long ago Grizzly Island ferry.

In 1954, in a press release from the Poultry Producers of Central California, it was noted that Lawler was retiring to his ranch in Suisun. Lawler graduated from Sonoma Valley Union High School in 1904.

His first employment was with the Sonoma County National Bank of Petaluma, now the Sonoma County Branch of the Bank of America. He started working for the Poultry Producers of Central California as assistant general manager in 1920. Lawler had become the general manager of the Poultry Producers Association in 1923.

In 1945, he was appointed by the governor of California to director of the No. 1-A District Agricultural Association. From 1950 through 1952, Lawler was director of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce.

Lawler died in 1960. His two sons, with their families, took turns living in the home. John P. Lawler and family were the first to take up residence after their father's death.

In 1976, the Hofmann Company, the home builders, bought the Lawler Ranch for development. Hofmann didn't want to simply knock the home down and offered it to Suisun City, including a small amount of money to renovate it. The city estimated it would cost about \$70,000 to restore. It passed on the offer.

The home was left unprotected. Vandals broke windows, demolished banisters and even damaged such potentially valuable items as a marble pedestal sink. The Suisun City Council threatened to have the home torn down within 48 hours as a public nuisance unless a caretaker was found.

A group of dedicated historians stepped forward. They formed an organization called "Preserve All Solano Treasures," which would be shortened to PAST. Mary Higham,

Jean Marcuzzo, Debra Woodruff, Dona Ryder and Sue Marquez were listed as directors.

The main goal of the history group was to save the Lawler House from destruction. They were determined to raise funds and solicit grants to that end. Woodruff volunteered her family's camper to be parked on the site and she and her husband, Dave, would "camp" at the house to meet the city's requirement of a caretaker. Other members of the PAST would spend time, giving the Woodruffs a break on occasions.

Little did they know that the caretaker job would last a year.

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