By Nancy Dingler

Saturday, December 08, 2007

Carole Noske and Brian Irwin of the Vacaville Heritage Council recently had their book, “Vacaville: Then and Now,” published. The Vacaville Heritage Council has, for years, earnestly collected photos and artifacts from all over Solano County. The new book is a fascinating glimpse into what Vacaville looked like in the 1800s and what it looks like today.

Many buildings have disappeared, but a surprising number of the original structures remain and are clearly identifiable from the old photos. In spite of a jump in the population from around 1,600 before the 1940s to slightly over 100,000 currently, the central downtown district has maintained its historical roots and early architectural charm.

Arcadia Press, the book publisher, approached Jerry Bowen of the Vacaville Heritage Council to do this book. Jerry knew that Noske had been working on a book of her own, a huge research project that was a compilation of the architectural history of Vacaville.

Jerry recommended Noske to Arcadia. Noske teamed up with Irwin, a 20-something Vacaville native to tackle the arduous task over the ensuing six months.

They decided that the proceeds from the book would go to support the Heritage Council’s brand-new web site. The site can be found at www.solanohistory.org.

To keep this site up and running and to continue adding historical material, the council continues to seek sponsors to help support and defray costs.

Noske’s interest in architectural history goes back to her college days. She had hoped to become an architect, but after two years, realized that the expense was too great, and left. Noske was raised in the Bay Area, moving to Vacaville about 15 years ago. Noske became the historian for the Christian Church of Vacaville. For their 150th anniversary, Noske sought out assistance in her research at the Heritage Council.

As she remarked with a smile, “I got sucked in” and has been volunteering ever since.

The architectural passion never diminished, so Noske began research of old structures in an around Vacaville. The hardest task for this book was to weed through the huge mound of research material and whittle down to just 95 pages that Arcadia Press
Irwin was working for the city of Fairfield on its centennial project.

Naturally, to obtain anything on the history of Fairfield to produce a documentary film, he contacted the Vacaville Heritage Council where he met Jerry Bowen and the organization’s president, Bob Allen.

As with Noske, Irwin has been a volunteer himself, ever since. Even though Noske had a lot of the historic research material, current photos were needed. Irwin’s many skills included photography, thus a collaboration was born.

Some of the more interesting facts that the book is just chuck full of, is that most people do not know that Vacaville had a Japanese Buddhist temple. Dedicated in 1912, it stood at the corner of Monte Vista and Dobbins Streets, where Pearson’s Florist is doing business.

The Buddhist temple marks a sad time in Vacaville. The area had been settled by a lot of Japanese, both merchants and farmers.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, fear and hatred of Japanese Americans caused the federal government to order relocation of the families. In spite of swearing their allegiance to America, all of the families were rounded up and put on a train to internment camps.

It is not believed that any of them ever returned to Vacaville after the war. In 1951, the temple mysteriously caught fire and burned.

Then there are the railroad photos. Yes, at one time Vacaville had a railroad depot, on what is Depot Street, that small stretch that leads to the reason for the demise of the railroad: Highway 80 with all its cars.

For a short time there was electric interurban cars that ran on rails from Vacaville to Suisun. The line ended at what is now the California Automobile Association building on the corner of Mason and Davis streets.

The “grand ladies” as the stately Victorians were called, can attribute their existence to master builder, George Sharp. Many of them can be seen along Buck Avenue. George took on civic projects as well. In 1898, he erected the Vacaville High School on the knoll, now known as Andrews Park. The brick grammar school building, built in 1885 was severely damaged by the earthquake of 1892.
George was put in charge of demolishing the old grammar school to build a new one on the same site. The two schools stood as proud monuments on Andrews Park Hill for many years. A plaque and the bells from the two schools are all that are left.

There are many pictures and stories throughout Noske and Irwin’s book - a shear delight.