

Bird's Landing finds strength as retail center

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Second of two parts

Last week we looked at the beginnings of Collinsville, founded by the notorious Hastings as a new frontier for a group of Mormons. The Mormons never arrived, but a settlement of farmers and fisherman was established. The land changed hands and was the product of a huge land scam. In two years the scam unraveled and the town was sold to Emory Irving Upham.

Emory Irving Upham was energetic and made it his business to make Collinsville a shipping port of importance. With his efforts, two more wharves were built and this allowed two lines of steamers to make Collinsville a daily stop.

The town was officially hooked up to the outside world via the Montezuma Telegraph, which ran between Rio Vista and Suisun.

Around 1870, William Hoskins arrived from England and became the proprietor of the town's hotel and general store. By 1870, Collinsville was at its apex. It was rated as second only to Vallejo in importance as a shipping port.

Collinsville was also highly regarded for its abundant shad and salmon fishing and the village was soon largely populated by Italian fishermen. Fresh salmon was shipped to San Francisco daily. "Little Venice" was a local name for Collinsville.

The entire town was built on stilts for the flooding that sometime occurred.

When the flooding happened, the fishing boats were used to run errands and for social occasions, such as calling on neighbors. Main Street itself was constructed of planks, which were also elevated.

By then the town consisted of two stores, two hotels—the predominant one being the two-story Collins Hotel—three saloons, a billiards parlor and an agency for the Pony Express. There was a boot maker, carpenter, blacksmith, wagon maker and painter.

The town folk and businesses were thriving. A schoolhouse was built, but oddly no church was established.

A prominent name in the area was Dinkelspiel. The family had a general merchandise business and A. Dinkelspiel was the postmaster. There is a Dinkelspiel Road out there today.

The principal industry became salmon canning. A cannery was established in 1873 by Booth of oyster fame. For some reason he was unable to make a go of the business and abandoned it. It was revived by Corville & Co. of San Francisco.

During the height of the season, the cannery ran day and night seven days a week, turning out about 20,000 cans daily.

A total of 180 men were employed by the establishment; 100 were Chinese. Another 100 were employed catching the fish.

Upham created quite an empire, at least 6,000 acres all told. His land ran over into Bird's Landing.

As a consequence, Collinsville was affectionately dubbed "Upham's Empire" and "New Jerusalem." When Upham died in 1897, he left most of his estate to Vallejo's Good Templar's Orphan Home.

In time, Upham's glorious town faded. The decline started with the deterioration of commercial fishing and the fact that river transport never really lasted. So Collinsville was doomed.

But the town enjoyed a brief revival during prohibition when it was known as "Vinegar City." The town folk made and sold illegal wine, enjoying some profit.

In 1957, the town received the ultimate blow when its commercial fishing was entirely eliminated through the outlawing of nets. The younger generations simply left to find work elsewhere.

In 1963, only six houses were inhabited and, by the look of it, that is about the number of houses in the area that are inhabited today.

Bird's Landing is just up the road from where Collinsville was located, it was founded by John Bird. Bird was born in Marcellus, N.Y., in 1837, making him the about the same age as Upham. He was raised on a ranch and thus was accustomed to working as a farm hand.

In 1859, Bird emigrated to San Francisco via the Panama route. He located in Santa Rosa, Marin County and Sonoma holding various jobs, including a farm foreman and working in mines.

In 1862, he relocated in Sacramento County and was in charge of a dairy and stock farm. In 1865 he arrived in Solano County and purchased close to 960 acres from Upham.

Bird set up a grain and dairy business on his land. This earned him the distinction of starting the first dairy business in Solano County.

In 1869, Bird built a wharf, establishing a shipping port for wheat and hay on the Montezuma Slough. In short order, a warehouse was erected. Thus was the beginnings of Bird's Landing.

In 1871, Bird built a blacksmith shop at the Montezuma Crossing, the "crossroads." This was the first blacksmith established that side of Suisun City.

The location of the blacksmith establishment marked the site of Bird's Landing village and the crossroads were just that—the point where two main roads crossed. As such, this location became a meeting place for farmers and ranchers in the area—the social center of the day.

In 1869, Emily Hargrave of Illinois had won Bird's heart and they were married. They eventually had five sons.

As the pioneer family grew, so did Bird's Landing. By 1876, the village had a post office and store. During that year, John Bird held the office of justice of the peace of the Montezuma Township. Sheep and cattle ranches in the area provided employment and income for the inhabitants. And there was the general store.

John Bird saw the need for a store, and it was built in 1876 by Jacob and Moses Dinkelspiel. In 1878, they sold the store to Adolph and Morris Dinkelspiel.

In 1880 or 1882, Adolph sold his interest to John Bird and his brother Henry Bird, a Civil War veteran. The general store proved to be Bird's Landings most successful enterprise.

An original store policy had been established of buying ranch products from local ranchers. The store's partners continued that policy and allowed ranchers the choice of receiving cash (gold) or credit with liberal discounts.

Eventually the store gained quite a reputation by developing a business shipping these ranch products out of the area, including to San Francisco. Sacks of grain went to Solano County destinations and to areas outside the county, including San Quentin Prison and Sacramento.

The store served as the post office, sold newspapers, life and fire insurance and offered the credit services of Dun and Bradstreet.

The general store was sold to the Benjaminsens, husband and wife, and was operated by that family for many years.

Willow Spring School was built in 1876 with a recorded 29 students. A Chinese laundry was established in the town along with a butcher shop and a hotel.

The 1878-79 directory lists the following residing in Bird's Landing: A butcher, shoemaker and painter. A Mr. Tompkins, whose business was junk. A Mr. Winters, in the liquor business. Mr. Page owned a saloon. Mr. Sutton was in the furniture business. J. Hilton was elected the justice of the peace. The two-story town hall was built in 1882 and served both as a meeting place and where the dances were held.

John Bird remained an active farmer, merchant and citizen of the town. In later years, 470 acres of his land were devoted to the raising of grain.

Bird was a member of the school board for 35 years. He held the esteemed position of postmaster for a number of years. John Bird was well-respected and had a reputation for unparalleled honesty. He passed away in 1921.

Bird's Landing lasted as a town well into the 20th century as a small but thriving village community. It has become a footnote in history, as it is known that the last of the tule elk was hunted there in the 1860s.

In recent years the town has enjoyed some fame for having one of the smallest post offices in the country. It was established in 1967 and is fashioned from a tool house.

In the town center, the current population is 27 people living in nine homes. In the area, there have been two new residents in the past 25 years. This is not known as a "growth area."

To reach Collinsville and Bird's Landing, take Highway 12 to Shiloh Road. At the Shiloh Church cemetery you can see the tombstones of the early-day pioneers, including the Bird family.

The road takes you to Bird's Landing, where you can view what remains of the general store and some of the older homes. The road continues out to what is left of Collinsville.

You will pass a clay-shooting club, which is renown as having one of the best courses in the United States. Bus loads of people arrive there regularly.

Once you reach the end of the road, you are at the site of Collinsville. A number of hardy souls call this home, but you can also see a few remnants of a town falling in disrepair. Some old buildings on stilts are rotting away.

If you walk to the top of the berm at the end of the road, you can see where the two "great rivers" meet.

Hastings' adobe, the second-oldest adobe in the county, still stands, but unfortunately you will not have an opportunity to view it. It is sheathed with redwood and is on PG&E land. Because one of those Montezuma hills is in the way, the home cannot be seen.

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