Cement bonds community with work and play

By Kristin Delaplane

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The town of Cement came into being in 1902. It lasted a quarter of a century, then was totally abandoned in 1927. But it had a hell of a run, as they say.

At one time, Cement was a bustling, booming town and a center of Solano County social life with gala balls, “smokers” and Fourth of July fetes. It was also a town reminiscent of the coal towns back east, with pollution and respiratory ailments being significant problems. Today the area where the town of Cement was located is called Cement Hill, northeast of the city of Fairfield

Pacific Portland Cement Co. was one of the biggest cement manufacturers of the day. Once the company discovered that a bonanza of raw elements to produce cement were to be had on a rise north of Suisun City, the company bought 900 acres, spent $500,000 to build a company town and began processing Golden Gate brand cement in 1902.

The 500 workers labored 12-hour days manning the kilns when the company first started up. After Woodrow Wilson was elected president in 1913, the eight-hour shift was introduced. Whatever the hours, it was hard, dusty, dirty work, this digging for “white gold,” the clay and rocks which were then crushed and pulverized for cement.

Back in the late 1850s, a squatter, Alfred Benjamin Meacham, sold 640 acres where the town of Cement would later be located. He sold the land just five days after he purchased it. He observed at the time that “an article made of lime was being produced there.” Meacham’s land sale was to the Suisun Marble & Quarry Co. Meacham received $1 and one share of the company stock, then worth $1,200.

Cement is made by grinding calcified limestone and clay to a fine powder, which can then be mixed with water and poured to set as a solid mass or used as an ingredient in making mortar or concrete.

Joseph Aspdin, a British bricklayer, invented portland cement in 1824 and named it after its resemblance to stone quarried on the Isle of Portland, Englang. Aspdin made a cement superior to natural cement by mixing, grinding, burning and regrinding certain amounts of limestone and clay. The first portland cement plant in the United States was

probably one established in Pennsylvania in 1871.

Cement manufacturers developed their own formulas, and by 1898 there were reportedly 91 different formulas. It wasn't until 1917 that a standard formula was established for portland cement.

The operation to produce cement at the Pacific Portland Cement Co. consisted of one plant and then two, referred to as the old and new mills.

The first mill was abandoned in 1917 when the old mill area ran out of raw elements to be mined. In time there were two crushing and refining mills and a dozen 60-foot kilns.

Apprentices earned $1.75 a day in 1910. In 1927, they were making $4 a day.

The company employed between 500 and 1,000 men during its time. Men were not only needed in the quarries and crushing operation, but also for the mill, machine shop, and rail yard. Railway cars would be loaded with rocks and then transported to the crusher.

It was reported in a 1905 Solano County pamphlet put out by the Board of Supervisors that "the cement works was the most important industrial enterprise and was a great source of wealth to the Suisun Township."

Once in the new mill, the company reported a capacity of 6,000 barrels a day. It was a quality product equal to any portland cement and was in use by the U.S. and municipal governments, railroads, architects and engineers.

The mill supplied 80,000 barrels of cement for the construction of Mare Island's dry-dock facilities.

There were two main streets in town with rows of single-story wood-frame houses, cottages and bunk houses.

The families of the company officials and foremen lived on one street. Workers and their families - mostly Italians, Portuguese and Spaniards - rented smaller cottages or rooms on the "back" street. Rent was $12 a month.

There was no charge for electricity or telephone usage. Light bulbs were replaced free. There were bunk houses or the Golden Gate Hotel as accommodations for bachelors and they had their meals at the boardinghouse or the hotel.

A "company" cottage was always kept in readiness for occasions such as a company

superintendent visiting. All the homes had picket fences and were painted the same shade of dull red. Someone cracked that the company must have got the paint cheap.

It is interesting to note that the town of Cement never had a paved sidewalk.

Many single men made arrangements to eat at private homes in town. Local households picked up extra pocket money satisfying the bachelor workers' craving for home cooking.

The town's one scandal resulted from this practice. A man's wife suddenly disappeared, as did the bachelor who was dining at her home. A number of months later, she returned with a newborn baby.

The town was almost totally self-sufficient. All the basic necessities were provided.

The company operated a ranch on its acreage where cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens were raised. This fulfilled the people's meat and dairy needs.

There was a hospital in town. The doctor made house calls for regular checkups and to treat minor aches, pains and general maladies. All medical treatment was at no cost.

There was a post office, telephone exchange, fire station, livery stable, school, park and baseball diamond, ice house and meat market. The company general store sold groceries, dry goods, clothes and was noted for its fine candy counter.

Fresh produce was brought to town by a peddler from Fairfield. He would stop in the street where the houses were and sell fresh fruit and vegetables from his wagon. The men from the two town grocery stores also made "street calls."

In those days, milk didn't come in bottles. People would take out a bowl or other container and come out to meet the wagon and have the container filled with milk.

There was no bank in town, but Cement had its own in-house script. Those who tended to live beyond their paycheck could draw on the next week's salary. When that was requested, they were given Cement currency that was only good at local stores and the hotel bar.

Water was supplied by a pumping system. Wells were dug in Vacaville and pipes carried the water to Cement.

The town had its own electric plant. This supplied juice for the mile and a half of electric railway that connected the mills with the quarry and the 12 kilns at the processing plant.

Fuel was pumped through a pipe from Suisun City.

Macadam Road ran from the Tolenas Rail Depot to Cement. When the mill first opened, transportation was by horse and buggy and rail. A rail line also connected Cement to the Tolenas station.

Five rail cars stopped at Tolenas depot daily; two westbound, three eastbound. Passengers took the train to Suisun City. Students would then walk to Armijo High School. In later years, a shuttle bus ran from Fairfield to Cement.

There was a two-room grade school in Cement with one teacher for grades first through fourth and another for grades fifth through eighth.

In 1925, the teachers were making $135 for a 10-month term. Since most of the children lived nearby, they went home for lunch.

There was plenty of activity in this company town. Two digs that were abandoned were filled with water and stocked with catfish. These ponds were also favorite swimming holes.

In point of fact, Cement was the social center of the county and the Annual Ball was one of the most anticipated events.

Held in the fall, it was certainly the grandest affair of the day and attracted local politicians and civic leaders.

Everyone wore their finery. Five dollars covered a full-course dinner and a night of dancing to a live orchestra in the grand ballroom. The ladies had dance programs - cards tied to their wrists - and the gentlemen had to sign the card for a dance. The gala was held at the Golden Gate Hotel, one of the county’s largest and most beautiful buildings.

The first three-story hotel burned down in 1906. The second hotel was two stories with a veranda and balcony across the front of both stories. Comfortable chairs lined the porches.

The hotel was built on a hill, giving the patrons a panoramic view of the surrounding valley. It was advertised in the San Francisco papers as a “sensational summer spa.”

Arriving at the hotel, one was met with pepper and acacia trees on immaculately landscaped grounds. The hotel had three wings with accommodations for 175 people.

Each room was equipped with a telephone and electric lights. Guests had use of the tennis courts and a swimming pool. There was also a barbershop, pool tables, and a dining room.

The Golden Gate Hotel catered to many dignitaries. Gov. Hiram Johnson once campaigned to a large crowd from the veranda.

The hotel was also the setting for a boxing match. This prize fight, what was called a “smoker,” drew thousands of people from near and far, who jammed the town for this affair.

Fourth of July was a big town occasion, with baseball games and tugs of war as the main events of the day. The company sponsored many events for the populace. Included was a yearly picnic at Putah Creek for the workers and their families.

Fun Day was another town gathering with a big feed, games and contests. One of the more popular contests was who could blow up an inner tube the fastest.

The local baseball team often played against the Vacaville and Suisun City teams. And while baseball was a favorite sport with Cemetites, they also had a challenging bowling team, “The Golden Gate Five.” There were fierce competitors for Suisun’s team on the bowling green.

The Cement Dramatic Society was popular for the plays it put on for the entertainment of the townsfolk.

Employee turnover was high because of the polluted conditions. There was an inescapable layer of gray dust everywhere. It covered the hillsides and hardened to cement when it rained.

Respiratory ailments were common, especially among the men who worked in the crushing-operation area. Crude oil was used for incinerating the elements. The smokestacks spouted a hazy cloud of smoke around the hill that was tinted green.

In 1927, Cement City ceased to function as a manufacturing center. The supply of rock and clay in the area was exhausted to the point that it was no longer economical to dig, and the company made arrangements to relocate to Redwood City.

All the town’s businesses and the school were closed. Miss Jensen, one of the schoolteachers, gave each student a printed booklet bound with a ribbon to commemorate this fateful day. On the cover was her picture and inside were the names of her 14 students with a meaningful reminiscence about each one.

The company offered to transfer any employees. Those who decided not to transfer had to find new homes, as the company and sold their land for $100,000 and auctioned individual buildings, which had to be removed from the land. Buildings that were not sold were destroyed.

Nevertheless, there are some remains of the town of Cement, which is now private land. From Interstate 80 you can view the “castle” just above Paradise Valley Golf Course. It is a structure from the mine.

People hiking the trails between Vacaville and Fairfield sometimes come upon a bit of rusted pipe that supplied the town with water. And, two of the cottages that were removed are at 512 and 518 Davis Street in Vacaville.

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