

# The communist invasion of Vacaville

By Jerry Bowen

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Fruit production in Solano County had been declining for 20 years and with the depression in its third year, times were tough. Communist influence in the labor movement had been on the increase for years and labor unrest was growing in the big cities.

In 1932, the Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (AWIU) targeted Vacaville for a walkout of fruit laborers during the pruning season. On Friday, November 28, strikers stopped a truck carrying workers to the Uhl ranch. Nothing much resulted other than an argument but the stage had been set for several hectic days in Vacaville that, in some cases, pitted neighbor against neighbor and friend against friend.

The following Monday morning, strikers erected a barricade of benches and boxes across Dobbins street to stop trucks taking workers to the local ranches. Police Chief Alley attempted to arrest four of the mischief-makers but they escaped when the threatening crowd closed in on him.

Two days later action became more serious when strikers attempted to pull a worker from a truck as it was entering the Joseph Souza ranch in Browns Valley. Vacaville township's popular Constable Stadtfeld, a giant of a man, stepped into the altercation and stopped it before things got out of hand. Another attempt at the same tactic was also prevented later in the morning. But the day's trouble wasn't over yet. That evening, Joseph Souza heard water running from the water tank and turned the pump off. A little while later, the tank, pump house and motor were destroyed by fire. Arson was suspected.

Trouble escalated when trucks were stopped again at the entrance to the Souza ranch and attempts were made to forcibly prevent the men from going to work. During the brawl that followed, one worker, Arthur Boom, was stabbed. Boom retaliated with pruning shears and inflicted several cuts on the head and face of his attacker, John Lopez. Rocks began to fly. Constable Stadtfeld's ear was almost torn off his head from one of the flying missiles. Two bystanders were also hit by rocks resulting in injury. AWIU organizer Donald Bingham, Lopez, and a woman, all from Sacramento, were arrested and taken to Fairfield County Jail.

Unhappy with the arrest of their comrades, about two-hundred strikers marched from Spanish Hall to the Vacaville Town Hall and demanded the release of their comrades.

Failing that, they continued to Fairfield and marched on the courthouse to repeat their demands and were once more rejected.

Mimeographed bulletins from Sacramento began circulating around Vacaville on Saturday, December 3, announcing a mass meeting of the fruit workers on Sunday. Constable Stadtfeld warned the leaders it was illegal to hold a public meeting without permission. The AWIU leaders decided to go ahead anyway.

On Sunday the protesters marched up Main Street to the public library and made speeches. Although the protest remained peaceful, 15 of the leaders were arrested after it was over. Nine non-residents were lodged in the Vacaville jail and the other six, three of them residents of Vacaville, were jailed in Fairfield.

Early Monday morning at about 1:30, a vigilance committee of several masked men, with keys to the jail in hand, removed six of the prisoners from the Vacaville Bastille. They were driven to an isolated spot near Maine Prairie. The terrified men were stripped and their heads and faces were smeared with red paint. The masked vigilantes then ordered them to return to Sacramento on foot and never return or they would be dealt much harsher treatment the next time.

That afternoon it was reported that the Sacramento communists would retaliate in force against Vacaville. The word spread throughout the county and angry citizens from all the towns began to gather in Vacaville to fend off the impending invasion.

The Solano Republican newspaper raised the specter of more vigilantism with the question, "So they want another party?" A large crowd of Solano county citizens gathered in front of the library and listened to speeches by Rev. Fruhling and Judge Bell from Winters. The speeches were on the subject of "the real menace to this community," and reaffirmed the resolve of the citizens of Vacaville to protect their town and families.

By 8:30 the next morning, it has been estimated there were 200 armed men and law officers ready for the expected intruders with another 300 available at the blast of the town hall's fire siren.

An all night watch was stationed and Vacaville was ready for action, which fortunately never surfaced. The only hint of trouble occurred when a few unknown vehicles made a surreptitious trip through town early in the morning and left in the direction of Sacramento.

The communists had one last card up their sleeve. A couple of weeks later, Vacaville Mayor Uhl received a letter from the communist-backed Ex-Servicemen's League,

informing him that a hunger march would be passing through town on the way to Sacramento. They demanded that Vacaville provide food and shelter overnight to the marchers. The city council and mayor immediately rejected the demands.

The marchers, consisting of only a few stragglers, passed on the outskirts of town without incident.

The ringleaders of the "red invasion" were tried and punishments were meted out. Apparently the people of Solano County and in particular Vacaville, made their point and the town returned to some degree of normalcy. Even today, in conversations with some of the old-timers, I can detect a little bitterness over the subject on both sides of the fence. Some things are just hard to forget, but perhaps they should be remembered as lessons learned as a guide to the future.

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