

## Vaca's downtown bustled in late 1800s

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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By the turn of the last century, the town of Vacaville had grown considerably and no longer resembled the sleepy little village of the late 1800s.

Its 418 residents and the inhabitants of the surrounding township could find many of the amenities of modern times right in their own town, without having to make the arduous trip to Sacramento or San Francisco.

After years of ankle-deep mud in winters and dusty clouds during the summer months, Main and Merchant streets were finally paved around 1895.

Vacaville Reporter editor D. McClain wrote in an editorial in 1884: "Many of the so-called sidewalks in Vacaville are very dangerous and many are the twists and wrenchings pedestrians receive while passing over some of them. On Saturday night last, Mrs. A. Garrison while passing down Merchant Street, had one of her feet thrown completely out of joint by stepping into a hole." Another editorial after completion of the pavement compared Main Street as having the "appearance of a Parisian Boulevard."

A number of stores lined Main Street and the surrounding streets. Farmers coming to town secured their horses at the hitching posts at the corner of Parker and Main streets before strolling down Main Street to accomplish their shopping needs.

"The farmers, they hardly ever came to town except once a week," recalled Roberta Gates Ormaas. "Most raised a few hogs and maybe one or two sheep, and did their own butchering.

"Did their own smoking of hams and things like that. Raised vegetables, which were canned, and all the fruit was canned. They sure didn't buy anything in bottles, like ketchup. You made your own and put it in a bottle with sealing wax around it.

"Shopping was more of a get-together. They would come into town on Saturday night and buy the staples - sugar, flour, and things like that. Everything was open on Saturday night. I can remember them sitting at my uncle's store with its great big stove in the back. The farmers would be sitting around visiting, while the wives would go around to the various stores, which were not very many."

Next to the hitching lot visitors found Miss Gilles' Millinery store, the Osteopathic

offices of Dr. Jerome Wirt, an ice cream parlor operated by the Williams' family, a small jewelry and watch repair counter run by Bert Deakin and the Vacaville Reporter.

The building also housed the Picture Show, where silent movies were shown, accompanied by an electric piano.

Dobbins Grocery store came next. Customers could phone in their orders in the morning and had them delivered in the afternoon by one of the Dobbins' sons. Another grocery store, owned by Mr. Paige, was located on the corner of Merchant and Main streets.

There were several general merchandise stores in town. Probably the most well-known one was that of George Akerly, situated on the corner of Main and Davis streets. Akerly's sold everything from pins and needles to baled hay, letting their customers know that if he didn't have it, it wasn't worth having.

The Triangle building housed an exclusive men's store, operated by the Schaffer brothers. Several apparel stores and two milliner stores could also be found. Miss Jessie Hay's store specialized in ladies' hats, a must-have for any woman going out. All her hats were made from scratch.

A popular place for the male population was the Ray Bennet saloon. Mr. Bennet served a free lunch to all his customers. He was also known for his fancy outfits, complete with large diamond rings and diamond studs in his shirtfront.

The post office on the corner of Main and Cernon streets was one of the meeting places in town. Each day, the mail arrived by train at 10:30 a.m., and was picked up and sorted by Postmistress Eliza Stitt and her assistants. Delivery service did not exist, so everybody had to come to the post office to get the mail from their post office boxes.

The Raleigh Barcar Hotel stood on the corner of Main and Parker streets. A two-story, wooden building, it featured a large lobby and a beautifully furnished parlor. Women were not allowed in the bar, but would be served in the parlor. Behind the lobby were a bar and the dining room, which served meals for 25 cents. A two-horse bus met all the trains at the station and brought guests to the hotel.

Further up the street, on the corner of Bernard and Main streets, stood the Vacaville Band Stand. A small, round gazebo, it rose about six feet off the ground. On Saturday evenings, the Vacaville Band would perform under the leadership of their conductor and lead trumpet player, local fruit rancher George Neil. People would gather on the other side of the street to listen to these concerts while enjoying an ice cream from Edstroms Ice Cream Parlor and Candy Store.

Edstroms' was located in the Walker Opera Building. Visitors could pull up to the curb and have their ice cream soda served to them in their buggy.

Behind the ice cream parlor was Vacaville' most exclusive men's club, "The Ulatis," where members could indulge in a round of poker, billiards, pool or just sit and visit.

Upstairs was the Opera House with its large stage. Operettas, melodramas, and minstrel shows could be seen here. The troupes usually arrived by train in the morning and paraded down Main Street to advertise the evening's performance. The hall also served for town dances.

There were scores of other stores: a cigar store, the telephone company, Reid's Drug store, Tsujita's candy store, cobbler shop and harness stores, livery stables and later Killingsworth's garage - downtown Vacaville around 1900 offered a lively mix of businesses to its residents.

In 1988, Douglas V. Killingsworth wrote a charming booklet titled "Vacaville at the turn of the century" which has many stories about the way Vacaville looked around 1900. The booklet is part of the Vacaville Museum's research library.

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