

Vacaville joins the electrical world

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Monday, March 12, 2001

Not so many years ago, the fruit ranchers living outside the city of Vacaville, if they happened to run out of flour or other household necessities during the rainy season, found it necessary to climb and hunch along on top of the fences to get in and out of town with their purchases on their backs.

Just a few years prior we understand that a wagon mired down on Main Street in front of Monahan's Saloon and the driver climbed out on the tongue, unfastened the horses, which immediately swam for the Pioneer Stables, and himself was rescued by a lifeline thrown to him just as the wagon sank from sight.

Today, on bituminized concrete and macadam roads, 5-ton trucks, loaded way beyond the warning of their manufacturers, roll through our Main Street, directly over the watery grave of the sunken wagon and out into the country to the rancher's door delivering distillate, lumber, and other commodities as needed, upon roads that would carry a locomotive without groaning.

As Vacaville has emerged from the dark vale of bad roads, so has the town grown and prospered and improved in every other particular.

Thus began an ad in the Vacaville Reporter on Sept. 22, 1922, titled, "Eyes of the World on Vacaville."

It continued to list large companies, such as the Western Railroad Co. and the Diamond Match Co. that had recently settled in Vacaville. But now, the ad proudly proclaimed, "It has remained, however, for the PACIFIC GAS AND ELECTRIC COMPANY to give Vacaville, not only national, but international fame as the result of the building of its Vaca substation."

"This substation is the largest in the world. An electric current of 250,000 horsepower is carried from the generating systems on Pit River to the Vaca substation and there transformed from 220,000 volts into 110,000 volts and thence sent on to the ultimate consumers around San Francisco Bay and vicinity south."

Water and, a year later, electricity had come to Vacaville around 1890 with the establishment of the Vacaville Water & Light Co. One of the organizers of this company was Sidney Clay Walker, who subsequently built the Walker Opera House in 1897,

where traveling companies and local theater groups could perform. The building still stands on the southeast corner of Main and Davis.

Water reached downtown Vacaville via pressurized hydrants for the first time in the summer of 1891, and residents hoped to transform their dry lands into fertile plots to feed their livestock.

Early in 1892, the company's directors decided to branch out into electricity as well. They purchased a 30-horsepower steam engine, a steel boiler and two generators.

The generated electricity was transported through poles and wires, serving more than 300 lights along Main Street. The Vacaville Water & Light Co. was an instant success.

Though the earthquake of 1892 destroyed much of these early improvements, the company quickly re-established itself. Local demand grew rapidly, soon outstripping the company's capabilities, so that by the turn of the century, complaints surfaced accusing the company of high prices and poor service.

In the meantime, larger electricity companies had established an extensive network across California, and it was only a short time before the small Vacaville Water & Light Co. was bought up by the competition. In 1902, investors from the Bay Counties Power Co. purchased a controlling interest in the company. A feeder line was installed, connecting Vacaville to Elmira and from there to the main line, which ran from the Yuba River to the Bay Area.

By 1922, Pacific Gas & Electricity Co. had acquired most of Northern California's small, privately owned electricity companies, providing large parts of Northern California with electricity.

After World War I, a rapidly growing demand by the larger urban centers led to a shortage in the power supply, complete with power outages in some areas. PG&E tried to address this by developing the Pit River project. A series of dams on the Pit River and its tributaries in Shasta County would produce electricity, which could be sent through a 300-mile transmission line to the San Francisco Bay area.

The Vacaville substation formed an important part of this project. The first substation in the world to handle 220,000 volts, its function was a. To transform the Pit River Power from 220,000 volts to 110,000 so that it may be distributed to the cities and regions bordering San Francisco Bay.

b. To regulate the voltage of the power received and thereby secure the most economical transmission and the best service."

The handsome building, "an adaptation of the Spanish Renaissance," was at the center of the most elaborate festivity Vacaville had ever seen. On the day of the opening of the Vaca substation, on Sept. 22, 1922, all businesses in town closed at 1 p.m.

At 2 p.m., a parade three miles long wended its way from Vacaville to the Vaca substation. The following week, The Reporter wrote: "Main Street was gay with flags and bunting, every business in town was decorated and the handsomely decorated floats and automobiles added to the riot of color."

Local and national politicians attended the event, the Boy Scouts Band of Sacramento played, the School Children's Choir sang, speeches were made, flags raised and finally, at 4 p.m., the electric current was officially turned on.

Later, PG&E served a public luncheon to all present which included everybody in Vacaville and its surroundings and most Dixon residents, too, followed by a concert and finally, an open-ended big public dance with music by the PG&E Sacramento Orchestra. As the Vacaville Reporter proudly recapped on Oct. 6: "Vacaville Sure Knows How - PG&E Celebration Was A Great Success."

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/61>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/61/>