

The homes that the Neils built

By Jerry Bowen

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Why is it that some folks have had their 15 seconds of fame and are remembered while others are left in the dustbin of unwritten history?

Some are remembered for meritorious deeds. Some are notorious for their greed, crime or other infamous reasons. Others are well-known and remembered because they were politicians or businessmen in a community. Then there are others who simply took credit for the deeds of others and historians recorded it as fact.

Then there are those who are unknown because they just lived a normal, ethical, honest life . . . and nobody noticed. We all know them. They are the majority that make up any American community. Some refer to them as the silent majority and others might say they are the backbone of America.

Let's take a look at one such longtime Vacaville family that seems to have gone unnoticed.

In Sabine's article on February 25, the extra photo showed a brass band. A Vacaville Reporter article published on April 12, 1888, tells about the formation of this band:

"Wednesday evening, a number of our enterprising men met at Templar's Hall for the purpose of organizing a brass band. An organization was perfected and the following officers elected: President, William Neil; Secretary, Walter Pitts; Musical Director, Professor Theodore Ryhiner; Treasurer, Thomas Fowler. The following are the members and their instruments, Solo cornet, William Neil; 1st cornet, E. O. Clayton; 2nd cornet, H. Steiger; 3rd cornet, Arthur Larson; piccolo, Milton Blum; B-flat clarinet, Joseph Nott; E-flat, Buss Long; 1st tenor, Theodore Ryhiner; 1st alto, T. B. Fowler; 2nd H baritone, J. G. Donaldson; tuba, Walter Pitts; bass drum, Mason Donaldson; snare drum, W. B. Pearson."

OK, there are a few familiar names, but let's concentrate on the family of the band's president, William "Billy" Neil.

The Neil family was among the early settlers in and around Vacaville in the 1880s. I haven't been able to put an exact date on when the patriarch of the group, Joseph Neil and his wife arrived in Vacaville, but the above article shows they were here at least by 1888 and more than likely before that.

Joseph Neil was born in Pennsylvania in 1832 and research has determined he was a Civil War veteran, so it is quite likely he arrived here sometime after 1865.

Joseph and his wife, Martha, had four sons and two daughters: William, George, Joseph, Charles, Ella and Etta. They lived in a woodframe home on the corner of West and today's East Monte Vista. The house still stands and now serves as a thrift shop for St. Paul's Methodist Church.

Joseph's son, William "Billy" Neil, was born in Pennsylvania in 1861 and died in Vacaville in 1940. Little else is known at this time about Billy except that he married a woman named Helen and they had a son named Roland Neil who was born about 1903.

Roland grew up in Vacaville and married a Danish immigrant, Johanna Holst, in 1924. Their daughter, Greta, was born in 1926.

In 1933 Roland bought 5 acres of country property near the corner of what is today Leisure Town and Elmira roads and renovated an old house for his family. They raised chickens, turkeys, almonds and walnuts and as a sideline Roland worked as a painting contractor. It was tough during the depression days, but the family clung to the land and built a house and filled it with cherished memories.

Greta married her high school sweetheart, Sundy Bera, in 1946 and together they built a home next to her father's house in 1949. They raised two daughters together until her husband died at the age of 40 in 1965. Four months later Greta's father died.

Greta remarried in 1974 and continued to live on the land in the house she and Sundy built.

Meanwhile, Vacaville's population really began to explode. It was no longer the little hamlet the old-timers remembered, even though it was still touted as a "small community." Tract homes were built on the other side of the road. With more people came highway congestion. New routes are now needed to ease the congestion.

Not so long ago, local government informed Greta that the new Jepson Parkway would encroach onto her front door. She protested, but to no avail. Vacaville bought her house and property and Greta moved to Lincoln . . . another fast-growing community.

The houses the Neils built on Leisure Town Road are still there and seem to be well-maintained. Their future is at best short and will more than likely join memory lane as so many others have before them. That is one of the prices of progress.

No, this isn't a particularly exciting story of the Old West and yes, more is known than can be squeezed into this short article, but it is important history and should not be lost. Someday, a descendant of the Neils may want to know more about their heritage. Without the written records, a search for information can be very frustrating.

Today, as part of the Sesquicentennial celebration of our community, the Vacaville Heritage Council has been tasked with interviewing as many of Vacaville's old-timers as possible for future publication and to archive the information. Altogether too often, people say, "I never did anything worth noticing or writing about." That is absolutely not true. We are interested in your stories, be you famous or one of the "forgotten" many. Think about it; without you, there could never be those other so-called "famous" or "notorious" people. You are important.

If you are interested in this project and would like to be interviewed, we welcome you to drop by the Vacaville Heritage Council on any Thursday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the old City Hall next to the radio station. If the hours are inconvenient, mail a request for an appointment to me at The Reporter and we will contact you.

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