

Elmira a quiet town but for trains, gunfire

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, June 15, 1997

In 1883, Elmira was a relatively quiet place except when the trains came through. Therefore, citizens were more than a little alarmed to hear gunfire one day. It turned out that it was the result of the town's constable, McKinney, firing on an escaping prisoner Napa Jim. Whether or not Constable McKinney hit his target is unknown.

Later that spring, gunfire commonly burst the quiet as certain citizens took to night geese and duck hunting within the small town limits.

Increasingly, the presence of tramps near and about the railroad tracks was noticeable as more and more of these track travelers took to the railroad highway. Things sparked up when

Conductor Knight ejected one Dr. Robinson, not a tramp, from the train near Elmira. Knight ended up being fined \$20 on a battery charge.

Meanwhile, at the railroad depot, a platform was added to accommodate the large amount of fruit traffic from the Vacaville area. It was also a common sight to see sheep and hogs being shipped out from the station. Allison and Co., who also ran a merchandise store, put in a pair of stock scales at the station to accommodate farmers who shipped hogs.

Mr. Provines thought to make some money in the hog raising business and bought some hogs from James Gates. However, when he put them out on his barley stubble field, the hogs would not eat and began to starve. Provines soon deduced that the porkers mistook the large kernels of grain for rocks. To alleviate their misunderstanding, he broke up some of the grain for the animals and they soon got the point and fattened right up.

Meanwhile, N. Sheeline was busy building an 800 square feet grain warehouse. His old one had blown down in a storm that past winter. Sheeline operated the other general merchandise store in competition to Allison's.

As an expansion to his general store, Allison operated a flour grinding operation from a nearby warehouse. G.W. Hood operated the firm's grinding department which tuned out graham flour and corn meal. J.B. Brice was building a large tank and windmill and was going to construct a cellar under the tank for the purpose of going into the dairy

business. Another product being produced in the area was cheese, which had been taken up by D.F. Parker.

Elmira had grown considerably over the past few years and business was booming. Even the "leading businessmen and capitalists" were considering starting a bank.

Those who had local businesses included J.A. Collier, who was described as the "jolly, fat blacksmith." Collier also occasionally acted as a real estate agent when acreage was up for sale. Later that year John Chord opened a blacksmith shop to compete with Collier's.

J.E. Hubert had a house and sign painting firm. Robert Kerr, who had briefly offered his services as a tailor in Vacaville, found the business environment in Elmira more favorable and relocated there. He carried an assortment of American, English and French cloths and guaranteed good fits. Milliner Mrs. K. Dally was located in the Chandler's building. A.W. Hamilton was going to open a shoemaker's shop next to Sheeline's.

In August, tin man Marcus Wolf opened a shop and developed quite a business making fruit cans for those doing home canning. The co-partnership of Rodgers and McKinney was formed to operate a butcher business. The business included buying and selling meat, cattle, sheep and hogs. McKinney was a resident of Elmira. M.C. and C.P. Rodgers resided in Vacaville. William Cadman was the agent for J.F. Davis & Sons, which specialized in carriages and buggies and phaetons (a phaeton is a light, four-wheeled open carriage, usually drawn by a pair of horses.) The Cripps Bros. were in business building carts. Cripps Hall was the site of many social functions, but most functions were held at the popular Star Hall.

The local Ladies Aid Society gave a New England supper at the Star Hall and to make it festival occasion, the ladies dressed in costume. Other entertainment at Star Hall that year included the Suisun Dramatic Association troupe traveling to Elmira to give a performance.

The Star Hall, one of the largest and best buildings in the county, was on these property with the Sherman House, a hotel/boarding house. Mrs. D. Ryan, proprietor, shut the doors when her husband passed away and put it up for sale along with all the furnishings for an asking price of \$6,000. The house had 19 rooms and it along with the Star Hall was situated on five lots near the depot. By December, it was evident no satisfactory buyers were interested and so Mrs. Ryan determined to open the Sherman House and run it herself.

Mrs. F.H. George also operated a hotel as well as an adjoining restaurant. J.R. Smout,

a "practical jeweler," who had been boarding at Mrs. George's establishment for a month, absconded owing her \$17. He had packed his bags and skipped out well before the household had risen.

E.H. George, who operated the barbershop, also carried a line of tropical fruits, candies, cigars and chewing and smoking tobaccos. His competition was James Groves of Dixon who was just opening a barber shop next to the Alhambra Saloon.

Raffles were all the rage. A revolver was going to be raffled off at George's Saloon and Kerr, the tailor, won the set of harness at the Alhambra Saloon. The Alhambra Saloon featured a fine billiard table. This saloon was to experience competition that year as Thomas Murphy was opening a saloon with a restaurant across from the depot.

Creighton and Griffin had a business where they sold fresh oysters and fish every Thursday, sold ice in quantity at one cent per pound, and carried candies, nuts, cigars, tobacco, stationery, pens, inks, pencils, lemonade. Creighton and Griffin also wrote insurance policies on crops. As the year progressed, Creighton, who was the principal of the school, ended up giving up his interest in the business to his partner John F. Griffin. A number of citizens had expressed their misgivings at his involvement in a business, while at the same time holding the position of principal. Griffin carried on the business and expanded to loaning money on grain to the local farmers and then had plans to start a bakery business. Meanwhile, S.G. Creighton missed his train to attend the County Board of Education meeting and struck out on foot. He was able to get to the Fairfield-Suisun area in time for the meeting.

R.B. March, who operated a grocery store and only livery stable in town, was retiring due to advancing age and declining health. He was also selling not only his businesses, but also his home. However, a sale was not quickly forthcoming and March decided to enlarge his livery stable.

In anticipation of the circus, F.B. Chandler erected a billboard 100 feet long by 14 feet high. Mrs. George secured the contract for feeding the circus people. It was just then that Al Marston, who had been acting as head clerk for the Davis House in Vacaville, was negotiating to purchase Mrs. George's boarding house and saloon. He renamed it the Elmira Exchange. His first order of business was feeding 300 people on Circus Day.

Al Marston had an 11-month-old monkey and proved to be a popular hotelier. During the Thanksgiving holiday, he sponsored a shooting match and between 200 and 300 people turned up to show their skill and win turkeys for their holiday feast. It was agreed the chicken shooting contest was the event of the day. One old hen endured being fired upon and missed 37 times while she, unconcerned, busily scratched away for worms.

The marksmen were firing from a distance of 60 yards with shotguns. The old hen's worm days were over when R. Allison finally nailed her with his little rifle. While stormy weather kept the large crowds from attending Marston's Christmas shooting match, still a number of diehards showed up. After the match, Marston sponsored a Christmas dinner at his hotel, followed by a ball at Cripps Hall.

Horse racing was another popular sport and E.F. Fallon, who had a ranch near Elmira, owned one of the fastest trotters in the state. Sadly, a mean-spirited individual sneaked up to Fallon's place and cut the horse's lariat. The freed animal ended up cutting himself badly on the barbed wire. The horse had been in training for an important race in the state, but due to these injuries, it was deemed unlikely it would be entered.

For a sale price of \$50 an acre, one could purchase 322 acres four miles southeast of town. The land was currently used stock raising and was planted in grain and fruit. Six acres were planted in of assorted fruit trees and there was a vineyard; 3 acres of old vines and 60 acres with 100,000 new vines of choice wine grapes including Tokay and Muscat. This dandy ranch was half a mile from the school and featured a barn, outbuildings and two wells with good windmills.

Grapes were a popular crop and L. Warner was selling grape cuttings at \$3 per 1,000.

At a residence five miles south of Elmira a man named Haygen, aged 35 and from a very well-to-do family in Santa Rosa, committed suicide at a friend's by shooting himself with a shotgun. The trigger was attached to his toe with a string. He had thoroughly prepared himself by washing completely beforehand.

The town was further sadden to hear that James Blair died of lockjaw brought on when a splinter lodged in his foot.

Dixon was often a place to visit and when the people of Dixon put on a July 4th ball, F.B. Chandler and J.A. Huburt, both of Elmira attended the festivities. The dancing lasting well into the daylight hours. Festivities also marked the end of 1883 with a Christmas tree at the Star Hall with presents for the children.

* * *

The Vacaville Museum is seeking typists, fast or slow, to transcribe oral histories. Typing may be done at the museum or at home. Contact the museum at 447-4513.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/621>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/621/>