

Sermons, fruit and bicyclists engross town

By Kristin Delaplane

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'The church was the real center of social activity. In this little town of 2,000, there were eight churches of different denominations. We attended the Presbyterian Church regularly - Sunday school, church service and on Wednesday, night prayer meetings.

"Sunday mornings we awoke to five chairs in our home adorned with clean clothes and a pair of well-shined shoes under each chair.

"All girls had long hair. My sister and I wore ours in curls. Two were tied on top of the head with a pink or blue silk ribbon. The others bounced on the shoulders as we started off for Sunday school in our starched, white dresses. We had 5 cents tied securely in the corner of a handkerchief.

"The church was a good mile from home. On the way it was necessary to pass seven saloons and, as spitting on the sidewalk was the habit of the frequenters of these saloons, we would walk as close to the edge of the sidewalk as was possible, hoping to keep out of range.

"Our father and mother would arrive at church later, after Sunday school, and we would join them for the church service. I loved to watch Miss Hatch, who always sat on the aisle in the fourth row. She was hard of hearing and carried a round black fan, the edge of which she gripped with her large yellow protruding teeth. This seemed to help her hear the sermon.

"In the right front corner, which my father called the 'Amen Corner' sat old man Harolett, who punctuated the sermons with well-placed 'Amens.' . . . His wife was easily influenced by a hard, steady gaze. If I gazed long enough, I could make her turn around.

"My father was an elder of the church and it was his duty to help pass the communion cups. Each elder took one of these long-stemmed silver cups of claret and started down the aisle. He handed the cup to the first person in the first row, who took a sip and passed it on to his neighbor, who might be the possessor of a long gray mustache. He took a sip and passed it along and so on.

"When it reached the end of the row, another elder would take the cup, give it a quick wipe with a napkin and it started its journey down the next aisle. It took a long time for

the cup to reach everyone. Then the performance was repeated with small bits of unleavened bread. Each lady lifted her veil, took a bite of bread, closed her eyes and shifted the bread about until it was soft enough to swallow.

“By the time we reached home, I was always weak with hunger. It didn’t take long to get the dinner on the table as Mother had it half ready before she went to church. Sometimes the boys made ice cream in the hand-turned freezer, using ice that had fallen from the fruit cars (railroad cars) as they were being packed with boxes of fresh cherries, peaches, pears and apricots for long journey to the eastern states. This ice cream was rich with eggs and cream.

“The pastor of the Methodist Church was Brother Bailey and occasionally we attended a different church for a change. Brother Bailey, a hoary-headed man of 84, was so firm in his faith and so determined to save the soul of every listener that tears rolled down his cheeks as he spoke.

“On the walls of the little church were vividly colored prints illustrating what happened to the unfortunate people who failed to heed his voice. The red and orange flames flared high around the writhing mortals who were sorry too late.

“We did go to the Methodist Camp meeting once. People brought their tents and some stayed for several days. We sat on planks and everyone sang songs. Then the speaker exhorted the poor hard working farmers to save their souls while there was time. He screamed, ‘Tomorrow may be too late,’ and many hurried to kneel at the platform and profess their repentance for all their sins.

“The village drunk was among them. Not content with merely kneeling, he rolled onto the platform, crying and repeating, ‘I’ll never drink another drop.’

“The following day he had a relapse and was seen staggering down Main Street as usual.

“Once an evangelist came to our church. I went to hear Mr. Stevenson three nights in a row. He sang “It is well with my soul,” “Rescue the Perishing,” and other songs between his persuasive pleadings. ‘He lowered his voice, ‘Now, while we all sing, won’t you come right up here and give your heart to Jesus.’

“Then the lights were dimmed and shadowy forms crept up to the pulpit. I got up to go, but my mother pulled me back.

“The next day I begged my parents to let me join the church, but they said I wasn’t old enough to understand what it was about. I was 9. They finally compromised by letting

me say good-bye to Mr. Stevenson.

“My brothers always worked in the orchard before going to school in the morning and again after school. There was wood to chop, brush to burn, trees to prune, chickens to feed and the cow to milk.

“The Fourth of July was always came in the middle of the apricot season. Father and the boys were up early, packing, pitting, sulfuring the ripe fruit and placing them in the sun to dry. Peaches were similarly treated a few weeks later and then came the prunes.

“When the trees were purple with the ripe fruit, my father would shake each limb and the ripest ones would fall to the canvas on the ground beneath the trees. Then the boys would pick up the prunes and put them into large lug boxes to be taken with the wheelbarrow to the dipping kettles. There were two of these large iron kettles, one containing lye water heated to the boiling point by burning brush under the kettle.

“The prunes were put into the 10-gallon can, which had been pierced with holes and filled with handles. My father would lift this prune-filled can and lower it into the lye for a few seconds, then lift it to the second tub filled with cold clear water. He raised and lowered the can several times until the lye was all rinses from the prunes.

“After draining, the prunes would be placed on trays and carried out into the sun to dry. It was necessary to turn each prune several times during the next few days to ensure even drying. Should rain threaten the trays had to be stacked and covered with canvas.

“After a week or so, the prunes were taken to the drying shed and placed on the white pine floor to sweat. Every few days they were turned over with a large shovel until they were properly cured.”Then came the packing. A 100-pound sack was held upright by one of my brothers while Father shoveled the prunes in. Then, with a sack needle threaded with strong brown string, he sewed the top securely, leaving two ‘ears’ by which to lift the sacks. The choicest prunes sold for 4 cents a pound. The others for 3 cents a pound.

“During the apricot season the farmers employed most of the village young people to cut the apricots, remove the pits and place the fruit on trays to be sulfured and spread in the drying field.

‘When Henning was 13, he got a job as a printer’s devil in the office of the Vacaville Reporter. He bought a bicycle, the kind with the large wheel in front and a very small one in the rear. As soon the new type of bicycle came out, he saved his money and bought one with two wheels of the same size.

"I decided I too wanted a bicycle and obtained a job cutting apricots for Mr. Davis. I worked from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the cutting shed, which consisted of a roof supported by four posts at the corners and a few others between these. This shed was at the edge of the orchard and unshaded at a time of the year when the temperature was often 110 degrees in the shade. I received 7 cents for each box of fruit I cut. Each box held 60 pounds of fruit. I only earned \$1 day and after 10 days, I had \$10, which was the price of the bicycle I had seen in the catalogue. I resigned my position.

"When Henning finished 9th-grade, there was no high school in town, so he continued working in the printing office. Two years later a high school was organized in a small white cottage. My brothers graduated in the top of their class and went on to University of California in Berkeley. That's when we moved to Berkeley, so that the boys could be home and walk to school."

History Note: It seems that both brothers, Henning and Joseph, continued to return to Vacaville to work in the fruit orchards. A letter dated 1902 written by Henning from Vacaville stated: "The town's booming. Shooting galleries, kinescope joint, restaurants, ice cream parlors, campers, tramps." In time, Joseph married Catherine Hamilton Buckingham, granddaughter of Vacaville's Eliza P. Buckingham, the noted orchardist who bought her land from Demetrio Pena.

Shipping of fruit begins very quickly

Every year shipments of fruit were made from the Martell orchard in Pleasants Valley. And, like all the fruit ranches in the area, their orchard paid well because the fruit matured earlier than fruit in other parts of the state.

Of the Martell shipments:

Nov. 20, 1897. The first shipment of oranges for the season from Vaca Valley to San Francisco was made by Mrs. Kate Martell.

Dec. 11, 1898. The Martell Ranch had only about an acre in orange trees, but they shipped a carload (railroad) of fruit from that acre.

The naval oranges were bright in color, large in size and had an excellent flavor.

In this year, more pains were taken with the orange trees.

They had been fertilized and for the first time they were irrigated.

On Oct. 28, 1899, the following obit appeared in the paper, giving honor to one of the original pioneers of the area: Jose Maria Almenaras was buried in Winters. He was

104, though some say he was 110 years old. He was a soldier in California Abajo under the last Spanish King prior to Mexico's Independence in

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