

Gomer School -100 years of learning

By Jerry Bowen

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Today, when many remnants of our past are disappearing, it is always nice to know that a jewel survived destruction.

Take a drive down Abernathy Road in Suisun Valley. Thanks to people who care enough to preserve some of these irreplaceable gems, you will find a small, red schoolhouse next to the road. The Gomer School Historical Society has created a mini-museum within this treasure of the past.

This little educational institution is named for the land donor, William Gomer, who was born in 1811 in North Carolina.

His wife, Jane Wells, was born in Kentucky. They came to California in the 1850s and began buying land in Solano County in 1856 with a purchase from R. H. Waterman. By 1860 the Gomers owned 250 acres worth \$7,000.

William Gomer died in Suisun Valley on July 5, 1862. His wife died in Napa on June 10, 1864.

Gomer School's present building, with its high windows and bell tower, is actually the second structure to sit on the historic site. The first, Suisun School No. 2, was built in 1857.

The first school had only one room and wasn't much to brag about. Superintendent of Public Schools of Solano County J.W. Hines described it in an 1861 introductory report as follows:

"Suisun No. 1 has a miserable old dingy house scarcely fit for a respectable stable and Suisun No. 2 (Gomer School) has a house similar to the one above. Unfortunately, however, it has been more recently built, thus dismissing the probabilities of getting a better one soon; it contains one room and nothing else."

Suisun No. 2 burned down in 1900 and the present Gomer School was built in the same year. The building was too small to accommodate the students, so a second room was added in 1926.

The school held classes from kindergarten all the way to the eighth-grade. Graduates

went off to the early Armijo High School to complete their secondary education. In the early 1930s a typical classroom had about 32 children, eight grades, one teacher and outhouses in the back yard.

The school was heated by a wood stove and the teacher conducted several grade-level classes from a podium at the front of the room.

Gomer's school board was disbanded in July 1957 when the school was absorbed into the Suisun School District.

In 1959, County Superintendent Fred McCombs turned Gomer into a school for the mentally retarded. Indoor plumbing and a kitchen was installed and Gomer School became home to special education classes. An addition was built to be used as a bakery and restaurant, which gave the students practical experience and public exposure.

It didn't take Gomer School long before it was known statewide for its baked goods, and tour buses began stopping to sample and buy the fresh-baked items.

In the late 1980s, the Gomer School Historical Association was formed and became a non-profit organization in April 1988. Its goal was to turn the schoolhouse into a mini-museum. The organization restored the building, collected historical memorabilia and pre-1925 items to display and made the room available to the public for meetings and gatherings.

Gomer's 300-pound bell, which was installed in 1927, was moved to Suisun Valley School in 1957. It remained there until 1986 when it was returned to its rightful place.

Unfortunately, in June 1999, vandals stole the original bell. But, thanks to the generosity of a Fairfield resident, Don Stewart, a new bell was donated and installed by local organizations and businesses on Dec. 9, 2000.

Actions such as these by Solano County citizens are some of the things that make our area so special when it comes to preserving the precious history of our past.

The original board members of the Gomer Historical Association, most of whom are still active, are Margo McGlone, Robert Pokorny, Joy Pettygrove, Sally Mullane, Dorthe Sumner, Alice Shubin, Fred Pelser, Bert Hughes and Barbara Van Putten. They have put long hours into researching the history and restoring Gomer School to its original condition.

The restaurant is closed now but the school lives on as a museum and in the memories

of the many people who passed through its front door to get their education. Stepping into the building is an excursion into the past when everyday life moved at a slower and perhaps more relaxed pace. Many former students have visited this little house of learning and related their treasured experiences within its walls to association members.

Now, as the present-day Gomer building nears its 100th anniversary, the members of the Gomer Historical Association are preparing to celebrate. On May 1 the festivities will include an open house, dinner and more. For those interested in attending, write to: Gomer Historical Association, Attention Margo McGlone, 4522 Abernathy Road, Suisun, CA 94585.

While you're at it, you might even want to join the Gomer Historical Association. These are dedicated people and can always use the help. It's also a great way to join the many people of this county who care about Solano's past enough to be involved in its future.

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