

# Mystery surrounded the demise of jail

**By Jerry Bowen**

Sunday, May 06, 2001

The next time you're enjoying a day at Andrews Park, go ahead and wander over to the waterfall. It's a little hard to determine the exact position because the banks of Ulatis Creek have changed considerably since 1906, but you are in the area once occupied by Vacaville's original jail.

It wasn't much of a calaboose as we think of them today. There wasn't all that much need for it when the county built it in 1883 on a small piece of land purchased from the city. The jail was constructed of wood, possibly railroad ties, and contained two cells. Tiny windows above each door and on each end of the structure allowed air to enter the building and exit through the ventilator on the roof. Bathroom facilities were possibly a small hole in the floor over the creek-side of the building or perhaps a "thunder mug."

Over the years it was considered to be an eyesore to Vacaville residents and was only used to hold hobos and drunks. People arrested for more serious crimes were usually transported to the county jail in Fairfield.

In 1894, town trustees went before the Solano County Board of Supervisors with a proposition to build a jail and town hall. The supervisors agreed to help Vacaville with matching funds raised by the town and for a deed to the lot it would be built on. Vacaville was also required to submit plans for the new town hall.

Much to the chagrin of the Board of Supervisors, after Vacaville had complied with the requirements, Supervisor Corn (Vacaville Township's representative) objected to the project saying, "The county was too poor to spend money for such a luxury as this and that he would bet \$100 that if put to a vote, the people of Vacaville would vote against the improvement." To say the least, Supervisor Corn was not held in high esteem over his comments when the new town hall and jail were turned down.

Vacaville suffered with its notorious lockup for several years until March 1906 when an unusual event "happened." On March 3, the jail was discovered lying in the creek! Some blamed a strong east wind for sending the heavy structure to its doom, but other speculation as to the culprit provided plenty of light entertainment to the Vaca-ville citizenry.

Police Chief Bentley and the entire police force worked diligently to solve the mystery of the calaboose caper. The finger of suspicion even went so far as to blame the sedate

matrons of the Women's Improvement Club of performing the dastardly deed. One can only imagine a group of demure but determined dames in their long dresses and flowered hats of the time, huffing and puffing as they levered the odious cooler into Ulatis Creek.

Well, as luck would have it, serious discussions were already under way to build a new town hall and jail. Nurtured by the dubious demise of the "crook-coop," the authorization to build the new town hall gained added incentive. In fact, it adds to the speculation as to which interested parties might have been responsible for the demise of Vaca-ville's little jail.

At any rate, by August 1906, the plans for Vaca-ville's new town hall were submitted, approved, and the tax rate adjusted at \$1.25 per \$100. A contract was given to local builder, F. M. Gray, who personally supervised the erecting of the building.

On July 20, 1907, the Vacaville Reporter proudly announced, "TOWN HALL COMPLETED. Contractor Gray Turns Keys Over To Town Trustees. The building a substantial one, of which the people of Vacaville are justly proud."

Vacaville's landmark town hall and jail was built for \$5,000. The building, lit by electricity, was built entirely of reinforced concrete, one of the first to use this method of construction in the West. It contains 10,000 feet of steel rod, 1,015 sacks of cement, and 11 carloads of gravel for an estimated weight of 300 tons. The only wood used in the structure was in the window frames, doors and a few ornaments.

The lower floor housed the fire department and jail cells and the open center area contained the fire-fighting equipment which then consisted of a hose cart. The door on the left opened into a small storeroom for fire department use.

Entrance to the jail was gained from a door on the rear-left side which opened into the marshal's office. To the right was the women's cell. Another door inside the marshal's office entered into the two jail cells and drunk tank.

The upper floors were accessed through the front door and up the inside staircase. At the head of the stairs were the council chambers. Two offices and a bathroom occupied the rest of the second story.

This fine old Vacaville landmark has endured the years in good condition and continues to serve the community in other ways. Many changes have been made over the years to the town hall but that will be the subject of another story.

Today, the lower floors are occupied by the Vaca-ville Heritage Council and the upper,

by the Solano County Genealogical Society. The society is open for business from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mondays and the third Saturday of each month.

The Vacaville Heritage Council preserves and re-photographs thousands of historical images as well as preserves historical information on Solano County's past. With its own photo lab, the Heritage Council provides historical pictures to many organizations and individuals upon request as well as historical information especially related to Vacaville. The council is staffed by volunteers and is open to anyone looking for information or photos Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. or by appointment.

Stop by and one of our volunteers will be happy to give you a tour of the "new" old town hall and jail with its steel cells. It's right across the street from the historic Andrews Park.

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