

Early schoolhouse couldn't manage to keep its name

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Providing education to the growing number of families was a major concern during the early years. In 1855, James W. Anderson of Vacaville, the second superintendent of schools in Solano County, founded the private Ulatis Academy.

In later years, Hester Harbison recalled, "The first school was not in the then very small town, but out in the country about one and a half miles east of Vacaville. The fame of the teacher, J.W. Anderson, was handed down to me by my two sisters and two of my older brothers, all of whom attended his school. Later, when the population of the town had increased, Professor Anderson moved his school into town."

This new academy, a handsome two-story brick building with separate boarding houses for boys and girls, was relocated on the south side of Ulatis Creek in 1858, but the school closed in the same year.

Two years later, in 1860, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South purchased the buildings and opened the Pacific Methodist College in 1861. In a letter to her grandson, Edwin, Hester Harbison remembered, "Two reasons for choosing this town were its location, and the fact that a number of citizens in town and country, among them your grandfather, Josiah Allison, were able and willing to subscribe liberally to a fund for the establishment and maintenance of a college, in order that their children might have the advantages of a higher education. At that time there was no State University, and, I think, no college in Northern California. Students came to this college from all parts of Northern California, at least as far north as Tehema (sic) County, from cities and from farms. ..."

The college burned down in 1865 (which is another story). Mason Wilson, Josiah Allison and W.J. Dobbins rallied the community to raise funds for a new building on the north side of Ulatis Creek (today Andrews Park). But the college did not recover from the financial loss, and in 1871 was sold to the Baptist Church, which operated it as the California College.

Hester Harbison recalled in her letter, "The first class graduated from California College consisted of one 16-year-old girl, myself. ... So, Edwin, your grandmother-to-be was nearly the whole show on the stage of California College, June 2, 1875. She played a piano solo, read an essay, and received her diploma from the hands of Dr. Worrall, whose remarks were so prolonged, and mostly about the lone graduate, that she could

not quite keep back her tears. I don't think it was a good show, but it was a never-to-be-forgotten ordeal."

Not only was Hester the sole graduate that year, but she remembered, " ... that diploma I showed you was not given me at commencement. The cost was too great to have only one diploma printed as it had to be done in the city. I was handed the diploma of the mathematics teacher, Professor Kelly. I received my own with the graduating class the following year."

The college also served as a center of entertainment in the growing town. Willis Jepson noted in his diary, "The real entertainment of those days were the Friday afternoons or 'speakings' at the district school, or the Friday evening exhibitions at the college. It was the college exhibitions that Ceph Bateman acquired a real fame in our town. Most every child in school was called up to speak a piece. If you could do a little better than the ordinary run, your effort became a recitation, even though your legs shook beneath you in a frenzy of stage fright. If, however, you had sufficient self-control to use your arms a bit in emphasis of what was given out by your tongue, then your piece became a declamation. For rare spirits on the school stage there was reserved the real heights of glory, an ovation, where graceful and forceful gestures clinched the awful periods as they rolled mightily forth. For Ceph Bateman was reserved the ovation. He was equal to it.

"There was something of a real atmosphere of a college town tho' not deep-rooted. For example my father took my sister Lucy Frances into the bookstore and told her to select any book she chose for a Christmas present, in December 1876. She selected Milton's poems, and I remember her face as she sat reading at home, lightened and rarified by the glory of the 'Paradise Lost.' And there were many more fine books in that bookstore. I looked at them with wonder and almost awe. With the going of the college the bookstore disappeared. You could not have bought Milton in our town in 1896 or 1906 or any of the great books of the world."

Though the community continued to support it financially, California College, too, had to close its gates in 1881. In its place, the California Normal and Scientific School was opened in the same year and served as the community high school until it was torn down in 1890. In 1898, the Vacaville High School was erected on the same site and remained there until 1950.

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