

Church Annex - Vacaville's Hub of Activity

By John Rico

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Who needs a gymnasium? Back in 1898, voters of Vacaville placed their stamp of approval for issuance of \$10,000 in bonds, with the money to be used to build the community's first high school.

The two-story frame structure, built on the present site of Andrews Park, was of sufficient size to care for the approximately 50 students who were attending school at that time. The larger portion of the second story was devoted to a study hall. But, there were no provisions made for an indoor gymnasium, where the boys and girls could participate in athletic events during the winter months.

Playing baseball, basketball, football and other sports outdoors during the hot summer days was acceptable, but when it came to having a place where the students could enjoy sports activities in winter, there just was no such place available.

Parents of students attending Vaca High back around the turn of the century frowned on most sports activities as a waste of energy. These parents would have preferred seeing their offsprings out in the orchards doing manual labor.

Vacaville was fortunate, and owes a debt of gratitude to several religious denominations in the community. It would seem strange that Vacaville in that period being one of the most affluent of small towns, had to go begging to church groups to make available some semblance of a gymnasium where sporting events could be held.

On Feb, 21, 1892, the Community Church at the corner of Main and Parker streets was dedicated. For awhile the church accommodated Presbyterians, Christians and Baptists, but as time rolled on it was to become the Community Church.

The church building, a large towering frame structure, not only had spacious worship accommodations, but also had a large room where Sunday School classes and other events were held.

This annex, to the Community Church, was the largest hall available in the community, and it was put to every use known. Sunday night free movies were shown, using one motion picture projection machine and a frustrating wait while the operator changed reels of film; it was the town center for club gatherings; benefit dinners; political rallies;

and for several weeks became an improvised hospital.

The annex was the nearest replica of a gymnasium affordable in Vacaville. All of the basketball games played by the teams at Vaca High for nearly a quarter of a century, were at the annex.

Vacaville's famed town basketball team, named the Federals, used the annex to entertain opponents, among them being the highly-touted Olympic Club aggregations from San Francisco. It was no effort for some of the larger players to toss the basketball the entire length of the short court in their attempts to score points.

With only a limited seating capacity of less than 200 fans, Federals manager Fred "Reco" Ream boasted of one of the most challenging quintets ever to adorn a basketball floor in Vacaville. There were George Hinman, Walter Stark, Stanley Dobbins, Earl Montgomery, Charles and William Burton and Antone Damiano.

Basketball teams from Vaca High, boys and girls alike, ran rampant on the annex floor. It was a bit aggravating to need to be careful and not step through the grating on heaters which were sandwiched on the playing floor.

There were the days when Tony Zupo dominated the sports scene here, and many were the nights that capacity crowds would turn out to see his teams do battle on the annex floor.

The annex, it was Vacaville's Community Center of Yesteryear. Chautauquas made regular appearances there; politicians expounded their views from the small stage provided; firemen served 50-cent spaghetti dinners as fund raising events; the Saturday Club and many other women's organizations made full use of the hall.

Perhaps its most critical use came in 1918 when an influenza epidemic spread across the nation. Being without a hospital, beds were set up in the annex, and as many as 30 patients were confined there at one time.

Vacaville's basketball teams swallowed their embarrassment many times when they had to beg for use of the gymnasium in neighboring towns, especially the one at Armijo High in Fairfield, which today is steadily falling into decay because of nonuse.

Then, came a change of heart among Vacaville taxpayers in 1929. Proponents of a gymnasium again went before the voters and asked for funds with which to construct a new building adjacent to old Vaca High at Andrews Park.

But, in the latest proposal, several classrooms were an added feature of the structure,

and the word "gym" was changed to "auditorium." The voters approved a \$62,000 bond issue for construction of the building, and Vaca High's basketball teams bid adieu to the faithful annex.

The addition to Vacaville's halls of learning was an ornate brick structure; and an asset to any community, but in its construction the steel girders holding up the roof rested on brick supports. Safety inspectors, in later years, saw these flaws, and ordered the immediate condemnation of the building. The deserted structure mysteriously burned in 1953.

Ironically, scores of Vacaville basketball teams had used the Community Church Annex, thanks to the generosity of the Rev. Arthur Fruhling who served 43 years as minister there. That building would be standing today had it not been included in a package purchase when Safeway bought all the buildings in the block on which its supermarket was constructed.

An addendum to this story: In speaking about the many Vacaville young men who displayed their talents on the cracker-box annex floor, the name of Louis "Louie" Mohr, was among the many. A few days ago, death claimed Louie Mohr.

During his high school days, and in later life, Louie participated in a multitude of sports activities. His spindly frame made him agile, and his determination to win made him outstanding in sports events.

Louie carried that same spirit during his 38 years with the Vacaville Volunteer Fire department. He was a fireman because he accepted the challenge of fighting fires and of attempting to help those individuals and families who had suffered this type of tragedy.

The community offered him a small token of gratitude when he was chosen the 1977 marshal of the annual Fiesta Days celebration.

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