Historical Articles of Solano County
Perhaps We Are Just a Bit Spoiled - Friday, July 27, 1979

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By John Rico

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THE ROUTE WE TRAVEL - While it may be true that our present energy problem is proving Ulcerating to some motorists, it perhaps would be wise to re-examine some of the routes we had to travel to get where we are today.

Some people will say we are fortunate to reside within the proximity of a freeway. Others will belittle this position as being antagonizing to moderate living. But, let's go back and briefly find out how Vacaville gained its convenient geographical position.

In the gold rush days, when prospectors, and Chinese laborers, landed in San Francisco, they sought the most convenient route to go to the Sierra Nevada goldfields. They had several choices. They could navigate the Sacramento River; they could wade through the swamp lands surrounding that river, or they could take the drier route along the foothills and through the mountain passes into the direction of a hamlet known as Vacaville. Most of these men, with their horses, needed water, so they chose the Vacaville route to be near fresh-water springs. That briefly is how present Interstate 80 was born.

Shortly after the turn of the century the horseless carriage came upon the scene, and gradually there was need for Improving the dirt and gravel roads, and there was also the necessity of attempting to improve the route of the meandering road.

Engineers for the State of California sought a more direct route for the road from Sacramento to Vallejo. There was some question as to the unnecessary jog which took the road toward Vacaville instead of continued in a more southerly direction along the Southern Pacific Railroad right-of-way via Elmira.

In 1913, the highway commissioners announced a right-of-way purchasing program which would keep Vacaville on the main-line route. It was a happy day for Vacaville area residents.

Vacaville was fortunate because it was being served by a railroad which joined the main lines at Elmira, traveled to Vacaville, and then went north into Yolo County. Two Vacaville brothers, A.M. and G. B. Stevenson were the promoters of this railroad, which as years went on finally became a part of the vast SP system. The original 4-mile line had its birth in 1869.
The names of the fruit towns of Vacaville, Winters, Madison, Esparto and Guinda, plus the vast potential of Lake County, brought into play another railroad, commonly referred to as the Northern Electric, because it operated from electricity supplied by a third rail.

It was on December 4, 1913, that Gray & Sons, Vacaville grocers, received the first freight shipment aboard one of the new electric cars. In May 1914, passenger service between Vacaville and Suisun, was inaugurated with four round trips each day being made. At Suisun you could jump aboard a mainline train going either to the Bay Area or Sacramento.

But as time rolled on the automobile and the truck spelled doom for the passenger service on both railroads serving Vacaville.

In its infant days, the vigorous Northern Electric envisioned tapping Yolo and the Clear Lake fruit districts. It sought an extension of its Vacaville line, which ended on Davis Street, adjacent to the present old town hall. The railroad wanted to continue its line down Main Street, out Buck Avenue and then up Vaca Valley. Vacaville’s town trustees frowned upon the idea of having a railroad running down Main Street, but it did agree to let the line run down the street to Parker, and then out Parker and continue up the valley. Had there not been a sudden decline in productivity in the local area, there is every possibility railroad tracks would have been a part of downtown Vacaville.

The automobile put into exile the passenger train car. Today the truck is doing a similar job with the freight car. SP railroad tracks, which invaded Yolo County have been uprooted, and today the line ends at Midway Road, being able to serve the Lucky Stores Distribution Center and American Home Foods.

The Northern Electric has also retrenched, with its line now ending at the Basic plant on Davis Street.

There’s a bit of nostalgia gone astray with the missing of the sounds of the train whistles and their bells. The passenger and freight ears used by dwindling railroads are finding new uses as restaurants. There will always be that attraction of wanting to sit inside one of these old cars.

It has been a big and expensive chore to provide us with modern highways. We often wonder just what young Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman should say if he could see Interstate 80 today after having traveled on his horse in Lagoon Valley on his way to the goldfields at Colma back in 1848?

They built the great bridges, Carquinez in 1927; SF Bay in 1936; and in the infancy of
the highway in 1915 pounded 13,851 concrete piers into the ground to build the first Sacramento causeway.

And when the Lincoln Highway traversed Main Street in Vacaville, travel was made easier when the city spent $7850 for the present Main Street concrete bridge. But the highway, later to become Highway 40, bid goodbye to downtown Vacaville in 1937, and moved out of town. Vacaville had its revenge in recent years, it has embraced that ribbon of concrete in a vice-like grip.

There may be some inconvenience in having to wait in line for a few gallons of gasoline, but are conditions as bad as we verbally indicate they are?