

Vacaville's Three Worst Times of Turmoil

By John Rico

Friday, April 27, 1979

DAYS OF TURMOIL AND HEARTBREAK _ Perhaps never in the history of Vacaville have there been three controversial problems which affected the lives of the people, as were those which occurred in 1932, 1957 and 1942.

As to their impact on the community, I would have to list the Japanese evacuation in 1942 as being the most profound; followed by a labor strife here in 1932, and later unfortunate antagonism fomented starting in 1957 when a downtown redevelopment plan was inaugurated.

Today, and at this time of the year when the fields and trees are green, flowers are in bloom, resident may rightfully inquire: "Why dig up old bones?" The primary reason for reviewing these unfortunate incidents is to attempt to evaluate the hidden scars left behind, which, although lost in history, continually appear upon the scene.

Chronologically, the 1932 conflict between ranch workers and owners brought about a situation which bordered on a little Civil War for Vacaville.

To set the scene, it must be remembered that the Great Depression was at its zenith. Bread lines were vogue and millions of families, throughout the United States were without food. The nation's economy had dwindled; jobs were non-existent; hamburger was selling at 8 cents a pound, and you could buy three loaves of bread for 25 cents.

The situation was compounded in Vacaville, because the products of the fruit orchards could not fill the stomachs of hungry easterners. The fruit was here but it had to go to rot.

Owners of fruit ranches were battling to keep their mortgage payments current, and a vast majority had to default. There was need for ranch workers, but there was no money with which to pay the wages.

The Agricultural Workers Industrial Union grasped the opportunity to invade the area, and with support of local laborers, challenged all efforts of owners to avert hostilities. A demand went out for an eight-hour day at \$1.50 per day; no discrimination of workers; free transportation to and from the jobs; all tools furnished; and that the A WIL be recognized as the official union of the workers.

To these demands the ranch owners countered with a positive "no." That's when all hell broke loose. Main street became a parade ground for disgruntled workers; encounter after encounter between workers and law enforcement officers ended in injuries to many men on both sides.

Workers and ranch owners who had been life-long friends had become enemies. They had been put into that position by the five letter word, "money."

From all parts of Northern California men, and some women, converged on the peaceful town of Vacaville, to take up sides either with the laborers or in support of the land owners.

In late December, 1932, after nine "agitators" had been arrested and locked behind bars in Vacaville's antiquated East Main Street jail; a key to the cell mysteriously appeared and six of the nine prisoners were carted off to Maine Prairie, daubed with red paint and instructed never to return to Vacaville.

When Chief of Police O. E. Alley was questioned as to just how a key to the cell was available he said there were four such keys, and that one of the unaccounted keys was in the hands of the late Judge Ralph Platt.

The town council ordered a new lock placed on the jail cell, and that henceforth more caution be exerted in handing out the keys.

Then came the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Vacaville had been an area where Japanese had congregated for nearly half a century, with these orientals doing most of the ranch work to be done here.

Hysteria ran rampant along the Pacific Coast, fearful that a Japanese invasion was eminent. The Western Defense Command issued rapidfire edicts, most of them pointing a finger at the Japanese residents on the Pacific Coast.

Before too many months had passed, influential Japanese men were rounded up and shipped off to relocation centers. The crowning blow came in May 1942, when all Japanese, men, women and children, were told to pack a suitcase or two, and be ready to board a train in Vacaville for a ride to their new home a way from the coast.

It was a strange coincidence that although the United States had declared war on Japan, Germany and Italy, the only local residents evacuated for safety precautions were the Japanese. In fact, many residents here of German and Italian ancestry, were among those who participated in the great round-up of Japanese.

Thirty-seven years later, Uncle Sam is taking the position that perhaps what it did in 1942 was wrong.

Those nearly 500 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry who departed on that day in May, 1942, had said their last goodbye to Vacaville.

And now we come to our third episode of turmoil. It had its roots at City Hall in 1957 when the town council by ordinance established a Redevelopment Agency which was targeted to modernize some of the deteriorating sections of downtown Vacaville. On the shoulders of Vacaville's first administrator, Robert Meyer, fell the responsibility of steering the agency and its efforts, but before a spade had been turned in the redevelopment action, Meyer was forced to find employment elsewhere. He settled in Petaluma, a job which he has held since leaving Vacaville.

Much of the blame on the collapse of the redevelopment efforts in Vacaville should be placed at the doorstep of federal bureaucracy.

The local agency had designated an 11-acre downtown area as its initial project. Its intent was to rid Main Street of some of its older buildings, and also do a way with the older homes in the area bounded by Main, Merchant, Mason and Davis Streets.

Uncle Sam was picking up the tab for the salary of an agency director, and other miscellaneous expenses. A complicated routine of procedures delayed any concrete actions on the project for several years.

Proponents of redevelopment envisioned a more beautiful downtown Vacaville; opponents recited paragraphs from the Constitution of the United States.

As months and years passed, the proposed redevelopment project became a political football, with merits giving way to personal antagonism.

The average Vacaville resident, although vaguely interested, cared but little whether or not downtown was modernized. In fact, owners of buildings within the proposed boundaries of the project took the same attitude.

As years rolled on redevelopment was kept alive, although nearly \$80,000 in federal funds had been expended here. But as the years passed city hall fell into the hands of unsympathetic opponents of redevelopment. And that was that!

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