

They Did Their Thing for the Glory of Vacaville

By John Rico

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PUSH-EM-UP TONY AND HIS BROTHERS - Baseball record books frequently refer to the triple combination of Tinkers to Evers to Chance. While this trio may have been prominent on the national scene, back in the days of "little old Vacaville" there was a combination which could have read: Zupo to Zupo to Zupo to Zupo to Zupo to Zupo to Zupo, and during the same era here you could add Burton to Burton to Burton to Burton to Burton. This may all sound like a broken record but it actually was possible here quite a few years back.

The seven Zupo brothers, and the five Burton brothers, were all baseball players, and most of them did their thing for the glory of Vacaville. Led by brother Tony, who was the team manager for many years, there was Joe, Mike, Frank, James, Nick and Sam. An eighth brother lost his life in a fire here many years ago. Add to the Zupo combination, the English Hills farmer boys known as Charlie Burton (now deceased), Lester, William, Elmer and Howard. Any other baseball playing aspirant had a hard time in finding a berth on a Vacaville town baseball team during the reign of the Zupo-Burton combination.

The seven Zupos and the four Burtons no doubt do a lot of reminiscing back to those sand-lot baseball days in Vacaville.

It is not my intention in this article to make a comparison of the athletic capabilities in our yesteryear with those of today, but I do want to review some of the adverse conditions under which the Zupos, Burtons, and others had to labor.

Tony Zupo, now a resident of Lodi, was a competitive athlete of the first degree. In all of the sports, baseball, basketball and football, in which he was a participant or acted as team manager, he continued his philosophy that there was no glory in defeat and he continually stressed this point with other players.

Vacaville's athletic teams in the Zupo era, a span of over 15 years, earned an enviable reputation in Northern California, to the tune that challenges frequently came from the Sacramento Solons and Oakland Oaks of the old Pacific Coast' League. Vacaville's baseball, basketball and football aggregations traveled extensively, and trips as far as Reno were routine.

Let's get back to some of the adverse conditions under which these teams labored. In

baseball, the players were constantly called upon to help prepare the field prior to practice or a game; in basketball, the only hall available was the Annex portion of the Presbyterian Church; and many were the broken bones and bruises as football was played on the adobe field at old Vaca High. Actually, the field at Vaca High was carved out of a rock hill in the early 1920 period by teams of mules and scrapers provided by Max Brazelton and Monte Gates.

In the early days of a new sports fad known as softball which was sweeping the nation, every effort was made to inaugurate the activity in Vacaville, but the essential part of such a program was the need for a lighted field so that the game could be played at night. Permission was granted to erect the poles and lights on the old Vaca High field (now Andrews Park). For several weeks crews of eager young men worked many evenings and Sundays to make available a facility which was to be used by hundreds of men and women in later years. Despite the lack of the necessary sports facilities as we know them today, Vacaville was able to produce many outstanding athletes; and scores of top-notch teams in several sports.

There are a few residents here today who can remember the Federals, a basketball team which earned for itself the reputation as the "team to beat." The Federals played all home games in the Annex, an abbreviated court, which belittled the prowess of the best of players.

The Federals spared no effort in arranging for the best of competition. Among the visiting teams was the San Francisco Olympic Club.

The Annex not only provided a court for the Vacaville town basketball team, but it was also home for Vaca High's squads. Vacaville hoop enthusiasts were envious of neighboring communities which had spacious gymnasiums.

Vacaville's population growth could not be called spectacular; in fact it was near stagnant, but times were changing and proponents of indoor sports envisioned a gymnasium for the community. It took several years, a bit of enticing, before voters came across with \$62,000 to provide a gym-classroom structure, which was built in 1930, on the present site of Andrews Park.

Vacaville could well be proud of this beautiful brick structure, in which were incorporated, a regulation basketball court, ample seating, and a staging area for other events. Vacaville had seen the light and had provided this modern facility. The community was growing at a snail's pace, showing an average yearly growth of 100 plus residents between the year 1900 and 1930. Vacaville had reached a population of 1156 residents in 1930.

When the new gymnasium-classroom structure was built, more attention was given to beauty, than was stressed for safety. State of California safety engineers later were able to detect flaws in construction, making the building unsafe under earthquake conditions. In a few short years, the doors were closed. One day in 1953, the vacant structure mysteriously burned to the ground.

The Annex departed the local scene in recent years when the Presbyterian Church building was torn down to make way for the Safeway supermarket. There remains that bit of nostalgia for the thousands of Vacaville residents who had been permitted to either participate in sports events or be present as spectators when the Annex was the focal point of local activities.

The Annex in our yesteryear had earned its place in the community. It was to Vacaville what the Cow Palace is to San Francisco today.

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