

Town Hall's roots go back to 1893

By Jerry Bowen

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Although the earliest year usually associated with the Vacaville Town Hall is 1907, when its construction was completed, its roots go back more than a century.

In the fall of 1893, the Vacaville Town Trustees went before the Solano County Board of Supervisors with a proposition to build a jail and town hall. Vacaville's jail at the time was a small wooden building suitable only for town drunks and minor law es were routinely transferred to the county jail in Fairfield.

Everything seemed in order at the Board of Supervisor's meeting in March 1894 for approval of partial funding by the county of a new town hall. But the trustees were taken completely by surprise when Supervisor Corn of Vacaville objected to the project on the grounds that the town was too poor to pay its portion of the expenses. After heated debate the project was turned down.

Vacaville residents put up with the little wooden jail on the banks of Ulatis Creek in what is today Andrews Park until nocturnal visitors rolled the little building into the creek in February 1906.

On May 7, 1906, three Vacaville citizens, Frank McKevitt, J.M. Wooden and Sterling Dobbins, went before the County Board of Supervisors and argued that a new town hall was needed because Vacaville was now without a means to incarcerate lawbreakers.

Supervisors approved \$3,000 with a condition that the county retain an undivided interest in the building, Vacaville was to provide a lot and initially the cost was not to exceed \$4,500 overall.

After a few more changes, the Supervisors approved the plans and specifications submitted by County Surveyor Steiger on Sept. 4, 1906. A contract to build the town hall was awarded on Nov. 12, 1906 to F.M. Gray with a bid of \$5,160.

A town ordinance was introduced setting the town tax rate for 1907 at \$1.25 on each hundred dollars and a bond was approved to pay Vacaville's share of the cost. Construction started on East Main Street near an eucalyptus tree planted as part of a grove of three on the corner of Davis and East Main streets in the 1860s.

On July 20, 1907, the Vacaville Reporter announced, "Town Hall Completed ... The

entire building is lighted by electricity and all the floors are of cement. In the construction of the building, there were used 10,000 feet of steel rods, 1,015 sacks of cement and 11 carloads of gravel. It is estimated that 300 tons of cement and gravel was required to complete the structure. Surmounting the northwest corner of the building is the belfry and tower, in which is hung the fire bell.”

For the next 50 years, the police, court, city council and fire departments used the town hall. The upper floor served as the courtroom and meeting room for town leaders.

In the 1950s, the fire department relocated to a new firehouse. The town hall served as police headquarters until the early 1950s, when the city offices were transferred to a World War II building in Vaca Valley Acres on Merchant Street. The Parks and Recreation Department and Marshall's office operated from the building for a few years before moving to new quarters, leaving the town hall empty and deteriorating.

In 1977, teenager Melodee Beelard, a history buff and Vacaville Heritage Council member, began serious research with an eye to nominating the Vacaville Town Hall as a national landmark to the State Historical Resources Commission.

After three months of laborious work by Melodee, the town hall was nominated as a national landmark by the state Historical Resources Commission early in 1978.

The city granted use of the town hall to the Vacaville Heritage Council in 1978, which undertook the task to renovate the historic structure. Herschel Smith, a painting contractor, applied a waterproof coating to the building's exterior in 1979 and in 1981 the entire building received a complete paint job.

The Solano County Genealogical Society joined the council in the Town Hall in 1981 and has occupied the upper floor since then.

An open house was held for the public in 1982 to celebrate the building's 75th anniversary, and in 1984 the Vacaville Town Hall was finally placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Still needing extensive repairs, a \$105,000 renovation started in March 1987. Work included replacing the second-floor ceiling, bringing the electrical system up to code, doing structural work on the roof, reinforcing the old bell tower and patching and repainting the outside.

In the front, tall glass-paneled doors replaced large wooden doors that had enclosed the area once occupied by the town's old fire pumper. In the early days, that part of the building used to be open to the street. When the fire bell in the tower was rung,

volunteers came running. They would pull out the pumper, drag it to the fire, stick the hose into one of the cisterns under the streets and pump the water out and onto the fire. On the 25th of October, Vacaville celebrated a rededication of the historic Town Hall. The old Eucalyptus tree, planted in the 1860s, was also cut down in October to make room for Vacaville's new radio station and office space.

For many years authors, researchers, history buffs and the curious have come from all over to pore over the old books, files, photos, records and magazines collected by the Heritage Council and Genealogical Society. For many years now, dedicated volunteers Bert Hughes, Bob Allen, Roberta Ormass, John and Betty Lorenzo, Jackie Foutch and Ruth Holtz have faithfully served the public interest at the Town Hall.

Last week the library room was named the "Roberta Gates Ormass Library" to honor her long hours of work in organizing the many books.

In addition, the Town Hall is in the process of receiving a new coat of sealer and paint by the city. The grand old Vacaville landmark is looking great and its future is looking bright as the repository of Vacaville and Solano County history and photographs.

The Heritage Council is open to serve the public on Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. or by appointment. Drop by for a visit and take a look at the more than 5,000 historical photos; you will be glad you did.

The Solano County Genealogical Society opens its doors from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mondays and on the third Saturday of each month.

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