

Elmira sits on the edge of history

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Anyone who studies history becomes aware that access to an area has much to do with the growth and decline of towns and cities.

Solano County is no different. Several towns have been built, only to disappear or decline severely when access to them changes.

Once-important towns and commercial centers such as Main Prairie, Batavia, Birds Landing, Collinsville, and Cement are either gone or are faded shells. Perhaps some may survive or once again grow in importance as priorities and centers of commerce change.

One town that once was on the central line of growth, even eclipsing Vacaville and Fairfield in expansion and importance was Elmira.

Elmira had its beginnings in two places about a mile from each other.

Probably the first was the establishment of a small, one-room depot on the newly built California Pacific Railroad in 1868, about a mile south of present-day Elmira. It was named Vaca Station. Wolf Levi established a General Merchandise Store, Tom Eddington built a boarding house and George Cadman moved his blacksmith shop from Cannon Station to the new site.

On May 18 of the same year, an official post office named Valta surfaced, providing the little cluster of buildings and some degree of official status, although the name doesn't seem ever to have been used to identify the location.

Later in 1868, about a mile to the north, Stephen Hoyt was busy laying out a plat for a new town on 40 acres that he owned.

The California Pacific Railroad was going through the same area and he must have known that the Vaca-Valley and Clear Lake Railroad was also destined to link into the same place in 1870.

It made more sense to have Vaca Station at Hoyt's location, so the store, which included the post office and Cadman's blacksmith shop were moved in 1870 on railroad flat cars to the new site.

Confusion arose over the name Vaca Station and the town of Vacaville, so the citizens called a meeting to discuss changing the name to something else. Stephen Hoyt suggested Stephenville or Hoytville because the land west of the track belonged to him. After much discussion, it was decided in February 1871 to allow Jerome Banks, a prominent lawyer and teacher to name the town after his birthplace, Elmira, N.Y. The Vaca Post Office was also renamed Elmira, making it official and in 1876 the post office took up quarters in the Allison building.

A general merchandise store was built by W.B. Davis and later bought by Josiah Allison, whose descendents later built Vacaville's Nut Tree.

A public grammar school soon followed and a high school was built in 1904.

The Christian Church divided its congregation from Alamo in 1872, part of them going to Vacaville and the rest Elmira. Stephen Hoyt donated the land for a church in 1878.

In 1902 the building was sold and the lots reverted to Stephen Hoyt's grandsons, Perry, Stephen and Herbert Allison.

Elmira began suffering the fate that most towns experienced in the old days - Fire!

The 1890s were especially destructive, but the community always managed to recover and rebuild.

During the years of prohibition, Elmira pretty much became the "watering hole of choice" when Vacaville went dry in 1909.

One of the early saloons, The Cabin, still serves the local gentry today. The same building also served as a place of business for traveling salesmen to display their wares. With the train tracks and depot right in front, it was a perfect stopping-off place.

In 1929, the Elmira Fire Department was officially established. The first fire truck was a quarter-ton Dodge. It had a Barton squirrel-cage type pump mounted on the front bumpers and the firemen equipped it with four old soda- and-acid three-gallon extinguishers, a 25-gallon knapsack pump, 200 feet of 1-inch high pressure hose with two shut-off valves and four nozzles.

After responding to a couple of fires, the firemen determined that the truck was too slow. It had a governor that only allowed it to do 20 miles an hour, so they removed it.

The truck could then do a blazing 35 miles an hour! It's interesting to note that the Elmira Fire District is the third oldest in the county, with Suisun and Dixon being older.

With the popularity of the automobile beginning to eclipse the importance of train travel, Elmira began to decline. New highways and roads bypassed the town and by World War II, Vacaville and Fairfield dominated growth in the area.

Many of the buildings, then a century old, were in a state of deterioration. In 1972, the old Elmira Post Office, one-time general store and meeting hall was a pile of fire-blackened rubble. It was believed to have been set by someone, but no one was ever fingered for the deed. Fire Chief Boss Holdener speculated that if Elmira had been experiencing high winds, the whole town would have burned.

Elmira suffered again in 1975 when Fry's store, a landmark in Elmira and one of the few country stores left in upper Solano County, was destroyed by fire.

Ralph and Edith Fry owned and operated the store for almost 25 years. The building was built in the 1870s and was a blacksmith shop first, and then a Maxwell car agency in 1914. After that, L.W. Eddy operated a small grocery store there until the Frys bought it in 1950 and doubled it in size.

Today, the town boasts about 200 residents, most of whom seem to like their way of living.

Some look toward the west as Vacaville slowly but surely creeps a little closer like an invading army threatening to consume Elmira and wonder what the future holds for the community. One can only guess.

Of special note this holiday season: Elmira's Four Square Church will be celebrating its 125th anniversary on Dec. 2 with an annual tree-lighting celebration from 4 to 8 p.m. Food, music and games for all. Everybody is invited. It's also a great opportunity to see this fine old building, preserved through the efforts of people who cared for the last 125 years.

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