

Yolo County Historical Society



Prez Says

I hope all is well in your household. I was hoping to share with you some dates for our annual Well, here we are again....in the same boat we have been in for months! Waiting....

I polled some of the board members and decided to postpone the annual meeting. So, we will not meet on Saturday, Sept 26 at 2:00. Please note that.

Thank you, Jenny for offering to hold a Zoom meeting, but several of the people that I talked to would rather wait for a COVID break and hold a meeting where we can all socialize.

We are in the middle of our membership drive. I want to encourage those who have not sent in their dues to please do so. If you have a red dot on your mail, this edition is your last newsletter. If you are on our email list, I will send out a separate list to those of you who are receiving your last email. Just send in the dues and all will be well.

The only item I have to share with you is that we will be meeting with The Native Sons of the Golden West on Saturday October 3 from 9-12 and hold a pseudo Stroll Through History. John and I will be giving a tour of the boundaries of China town on Dead Cat Alley. There will be tours of the Roth Building and the Porter Building. We are asking individuals to wear masks and will try to practice social distancing.

If you are interested in helping with the China town tour, please contact me. 662-2189 or email at khwoodland@aol.com.

This month's newsletter is about the fires that devastated the county towns in the late 1800's and early 1900's. I thought that was appropriate since we are inundated with fires in California. It gives us pause to remember that even in devastation, new life (goals, directions) emerge. Remember, nothing is ever new! History does repeat itself.

Remember, as always,
History Rules!

Kathy Harryman, President

THE FLAMES OF YOLO COUNTY – see inside



Fires in Yolo County

by Kathy Harryman¹

All the communities in Yolo County have been devastated by fires at one time or another. Since we are surrounded by fires in California, I thought this was a good time to remember the devastating fires in some of the towns in this county.

Knights Landing

On September 17, 1938, a destructive fire broke out on Front Street. The cause of the fire was unknown, but some thought it might have been from an electrical short. Others thought that it might have started by sparks from the stove chimney in Ed Hass' restaurant that fell on the roof tops and set the shingles on fire. Knights Landing was incapable of defending itself against a major fire. Located on the Sacramento River, they did not have a fire department. Their fire brigade was staffed by volunteers. Tom Anderson gave his eyewitness account of the damage:

The first building to topple was Bristow's home, then the pool hall and Hass' restaurant. ... fire gutted Bradshaw's store. Knox's combined drugstore and post office was next...flames reached out to Mike Burger's barbershop. Then my parent's old general merchandise store. The Hershey House became an inferno.... The unrelenting flames crept along Front Street, destroying Dixon's Welcome Theater, Knox's home, Etta Keith's ice cream parlor, Bill Bloom's restaurant. ... The flames rounded the corner and whipped Packard's clothing store. The destruction of Joe Muller's barbershop put an end to the fire because it was the last building on the block. Even the buildings on the other side of Front Street were not spared. Mrs. Moore's Tea Room, Doc Dixon's office, and two rooming houses were gone too. ...The total damage was \$80,000.00 .

From *Knights Landing, The River, The Land and It's People* by Shipley Walters and Tom Anderson pg. 43, 44.

Eleven years later, Knights Landing became part of a fire district.

Winters

The first recorded fire occurred on Saturday, Oct 17, 1897. An early morning fire threatened to burn the city. The fire began behind Willis' tin shop on First Street destroying the Masonic Hall. Miss Emma Lechleiter, whose father owned a steam powered company, and her mother immediately started a fire to build up steam to run the pump. They had the steam ready in 13 minutes. Their quick action and the bucket brigades that were formed saved the town of Winters. The cost of this fire was estimated to be \$20,000.

The next major fire occurred on July 19, 1901, in the heart of the town's industrial area east of the railroad tracks. Because of the strong west winds, within an hour, six buildings were reduced to gleaming coals, including the Winters Dried Fruit Company, the Chandler Lumber Yard, the Grangers' warehouse, and barns. Many tons of dried fruit and a large quantity of pits were burning as though they were nothing but fuel. Train cars loaded with grain went up in flames.

The community's defense against fire was limited. The volunteer fire department's equipment consisted of a portable hose cart, a few ladders, some fire extinguishers and buckets. The citizens of Winters used wet rags and bucket brigades to fight the fire at the Harlan building preventing the fire from burning the entire south part of town. The total cost of this fire was \$100,000. The next year, the Winters Fire Department was reorganized.

There were other incidences of fires that only impacted individual buildings. Henry Craner's Big Corner Store burned in 1903. The fire also damaged the Bank of Winters. In 1935, three packing houses, the north half of the fruit loading platform and six railroad cars were burned. The cost of that fire was \$250,000.

From **Winters: A Heritage of Horticulture, A Harmony of Purpose** by Joanne Leach Larkey, pp. 47,48,73 and *Winters Centennial*, May 22, 1975.

Continued on the next page

Zamora/Black's Station

The first fire in Zamora began around midnight on June 10, 1902. It started in the Burger building which housed a saloon. Next was a barber shop, then another saloon, plus a barn which was behind the saloon. The hotel and Black's store were saved.

On July 19, 1919, two barns were destroyed. The fire spread to a stubble field and was still burning an hour and half later. The next big fire took place on June 18, 1924. It started in the hotel building that was also used as a post office and residence. A bucket brigade was formed, and a fire truck was sent from Woodland, but it was too late to save the Foster property. The next building to burn was a small shack at the rear of Foster's property. It was said that if a strong wind had been blowing, the whole town might have burned. (The History of Black's Station/Zamora It's People Elaine Hermle, pg 34)

Woodland

On July 2, 1892, the north wind was blowing when flames broke out in a small barn on Dead Cat Alley behind Bartoli's grocery store. An account in the *Yolo Democrat* stated

Peter Calder and Harry Gremenger were among the earliest to see (the flames). ...They jumped out of their wagon and ran toward the barn, shouting an alarm. A violent north wind prevailed at the time....

It took the Woodland fire department twenty minutes to get their hook and ladder truck to the fire. The firemen and volunteers fought the flames valiantly, but water pressure was low. The two 500-foot hoses were ineffective against the raging inferno. Engine No. 1, Woodland's old steamer, blew up and sank into the mud. (Later repaired, it continued to be the pride and joy of the Woodland fire department.)

The city sent a telegram to Sacramento for help. They responded by loading their engine and hose cart on a train. The trip took 20 minutes. With the help of Sacramento's professional firefighters, and Woodland volunteers the fire was put out about 4:30 a.m.

On the night of the fire, the city trustees appointed watchmen to protect the city from looters. The newspaper reported that "bad characters from Sacramento" had arrived in town on the train with the fire engine and in the confusion were helping themselves to books, clothing, money and jewelry.

When the last embers of the fire were extinguished, the most destructive fire in Woodland history had destroyed a two-block area of downtown. Eight houses, ten barns, the Exchange Hotel, Woodland Opera House, Dietz and Beamer buildings, Bartoli's grocery store, Lasky's saloon, Duncan's shoe store, Forest and Hodges' grocery store, J. Pror's candy store, and the Jackson building. Doctors Ross, McFarlane, Gray and Lawhead lost their medical libraries and S.L. Randolph lost \$3,000 worth of liquor. Total loss was estimated at \$200,000.

From *Woodland City of Trees* by Shipley Walters, pg. 47-49)

DAVIS

The devastating blaze of 1916 destroyed half of downtown Davis, burning unchecked because the city had no pressurized water supply or fire department. Davis residents could only futilely toss buckets of water on the inferno until a Southern Pacific train with a firefighting rail car arrived from Sacramento. Newspaper accounts from the time speculated the fire easily could have been stopped with proper water lines and a fire department — things that come with incorporation.

Continued on the next page

Continued from preceding page – **Fires in Yolo County**



ry.ucdavis.edu/news/happy-100th-birthday-city-davis/

The *Sacramento Union* newspaper reported at the time, "The businessmen believe if the town had a single line of hose the fire could have been checked at the start. It is probable that the fire will hasten the incorporation of the town." And it did. "On March 20, 1917, residents voted in favor of incorporation: 231-87. A resolution declaring the incorporation of the City of Davis was adopted by the Yolo County Board of Supervisors on March 26 and was recorded with the California Secretary of State on March 28, 1917. The City of Davis was formed."

From CityofDavis.org and <https://www.library.ucdavis.edu/news/happy-100th-birthday-city-davis/>

Madison

The following information was in the Winters Centennial, May 22, 1975. Madison, which once was predicted to be the upcoming largest inland city in Northern California was hit by devastating fires several times and dropped any pretention it had to fame.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, almost all of information is from the *Yolo County Historical Society* published books.





MAIN STREET AFTER THE FIRE, JULY 3, 1892.

A disastrous fire broke out on July 2, 1892 near First Street and Dead Cat Alley. By the time the flames died down, Fireman W.W. Porter was dead, two business blocks and one residential block were gutted, and damage was estimated at \$200,000. This photo shows the north side of Main Street between Second and First streets, looking west. Notice the steamer, Eng No. 1 at center left of the picture.

— Courtesy, Yolo County Archives



rounded the corner and whipped Packard's clothing store. The destruction of Joe Muller's barbershop put an end to the fire, for Joe's was the last building on the block. Front Street was laid to rest.

Even the buildings on the other side of Front Street weren't spared. Flimsy structures that rested on pilings rising up out of the Sacramento River housed Mrs. Moore's Tea Room, Doc Dixon's office, two rooming houses and a small Mexican cafe. When the smoke cleared, all of them were gone, too. The total damage caused by the fire was estimated at \$100,000.

FRONT STREET BURNS. 1938.

When fire broke out on Front Street on September 17, 1938, volunteers only buckets and two chemical pushcarts to fight it. Bewildered residents tried to save what they could; others stood by, watching helplessly.

---Courtesy, Thomas A. Lee

Dr. Cleve Baker – Remembrance

It is with great sadness that we mourn the death of one of our own. Dr. Cleve Baker died on August 12 at the age of 85 years. Cleve was an avid supporter of the Historical Society. He also participated in the Stroll Through History and the Woodland Opera House. His love of history and Dixieland jazz was apparent at many of the historical activities in town. He was often seen carrying his portable piano ready to play Dixieland at a moment's notice. He will be missed.

These folks keep us from burning out. Patrons

Thanks so much to the following for supporting the *Yolo County Historical Society*. We could not run this organization without your additional help.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cleve Baker | Sandy and Bill Marble |
| Starr and Jeff Barrow | Nancy Hatcher McCullough |
| Don and Pat Campbell | Jane Niehaus |
| Odette & Dan Christenson | Claudia and Chuck Owens |
| Katherine Ashley Cobb | Marjorie Pearce |
| Rob Coman | Jane Proctor (new) |
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| John and Kathy Harryman | Lynn Wilen (new) |
| Dan & Sarah Hrdy | David Wilkinson |
| Geraldine Hunter | Peggy Witham |
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Become a patron by contributing \$100 or more.

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They support the Yolo County Historical Society.

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- Corner Drug**
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