

# Yolo County Historical Society



FEBRUARY 2013

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

I don't know about you but I am tired of being cold. In August I will be saying, "don't know about you, but I am tired of being hot." Never the less life goes on and the activities that we continue to enjoy as we age are available to us.

One of those activities is keeping in touch with the past. The Board of the Historical Society endeavors to plan and then bring reminders i.e., visits to historical places, Sunday afternoon programs which delve into the history of our communities; providing this monthly newsletter which keeps you informed of various activities and of course, working with local historians who have the ability to research and write books dealing with local history. As I said above, we have monthly Sunday afternoon programs, however this month it will be on **SATURDAY, Feb. 23<sup>rd</sup>**. Please see the enclosed flier. Would be nice to do some carpooling!

Finally, if you have not renewed your membership in the Society, we need your support as we plan this years' events for all to enjoy. **If you have a red dot on this newsletter, we have not received your renewal.**

And, by the way, this years' "picnic" which has been held at the Gibson Mansion for many many years will be at a new historic venue which most of you probably don't even know exists and if you do you probably have not had the opportunity to visit.

Peace,  
BJ Ford, YCHS President

## Hattie Happenings

The Hattie Weber Museum of Davis started the new year with two new exhibits. Our tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. includes some recently discovered snapshots taken by Freedom Marchers from the Davis area who travelled to Selma. The other features the Dresbach Mansion and includes a collection of bottles discovered at the site of the old well when it was excavated during the building of Mansion Square. Merrily DuPree researched the ownership of the Mansion and constructed an interesting timeline that is also part of the exhibit. We are starting patio brick sales this month. Space in the Rose Garden is very limited so potential buyers are urged to act quickly. Order forms are available at the Museum from 10 to 4 on Wednesdays and Saturdays or from Mary Lee Thomson at [joe-vra@pacbell.net](mailto:joe-vra@pacbell.net) or 756-0517. Mid fiscal year statistics show the Museum is on track to set another visitor record – we've had 1,386 people from 45 cities other than Davis, 18 states other than California and 16 countries other than the USA since July 1, 2012. We've mounted six temporary exhibits and hosted a brick dedication ceremony, greeted trick or treaters at Halloween with pumpkins to decorate, and passed out Christmas goodie bags containing treats similar to those of 1898 to kids.

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## A Resurgence of Olives by Ann F. Scheuring

In Yolo County during the last five years thousands of olive trees have been planted, most of them destined for oil production. Olive acreage climbed from less than 200 acres in 2006 to more than 3,300 in 2011, and more is on the way. Extensive new plantings can be seen on former rangeland along Road 19 west of Woodland, and others, from very small to fairly large, have

appeared elsewhere in the county and in the Capay Valley.

This new interest in olives adds to the diversity of today's Yolo County agriculture, but it also recapitulates history. Olive trees came to California more than 200 years ago with the Spanish missionaries, who brought seeds and cuttings to plant in the gardens that surrounded their buildings. These drought-tolerant, thrifty trees flourished here as in Spain and provided oil and table olives for the missions as well as cuttings to help others begin olive plantings too.

By the 1840s olive trees were fairly common in Southern California, but it was not until after California became a state that settlers in the Sacramento Valley also tried their cultivation. With their ease of care and attractive year-round gray-green foliage, olive trees were often used as roadside plantings or borders to fields, and became a favorite for marking entry lanes to some of the big ranches. Most Americans had never acquired a taste for olives or their oil, so at first their processing remained more or less a cottage industry for Italian immigrants.

The Jerome Davis farm in southern Yolo County, now part of the UC Davis campus, had olive trees in the 1850s, commemorated by a plaque near Olson Hall. At the Wolfskill land grant of some 17,000 acres along Putah Creek to the west, John Wolfskill in the 1860s planted lines of olives leading up to his home and headquarters. Those massive old trees still grow there along with many others at UCD's Wolfskill Experimental Orchards, and in the USDA Germplasm collection at Wolfskill today more than 180 olive varieties are available to researchers and breeders.

Other historic Yolo County olive plantings can be seen near the former LaRue ranch home along Russell Boulevard west of Davis; at the Gibson House on Gibson Road in Woodland; and at the Yolo County Fairgrounds, former site of the Blowers ranch southeast of Woodland. R.B. Blowers, who is said to have made the first commercial olive oil in Yolo County, won a first prize at the Paris International competition in 1879 and at the New Orleans exposition of 1886.

Several county roads still boast impressive stretches of bordering olive trees, notably along portions of Roads 98 and 99 and Russell Boulevard west toward Winters, with shorter rows in other areas.

Some of these plantings may have been made during the 1880s-90s boom in olive planting. According to Edward Wickson, author of the popular *California Fruits and How to Grow Them*, the statewide enthusiasm for growing olive trees during this period amounted almost to infatuation, encouraged by promoters and nurserymen and even by favorable reports from the University of California, where dozens of the trees were planted on the young Berkeley campus.

This speculative boom began to decline as it became clear that olive trees would not thrive on the poor soils where many had been planted, and that closer attention had to be paid to both cultivation and processing. After 1900 there was some uprooting of scrawny olive orchards, and acreage declined over the years thereafter. Though the trees themselves continued to be popular for their aesthetic value, the olive industry remained only a small part of California's agricultural cornucopia.

There were reasons for this. To compete with cheaper European olive oil, some early olive oil producers in California diluted their product with bland but less expensive cottonseed oil, and California oil acquired a reputation for poor quality. Pure food laws eventually prohibited selling a mixture under the name of olive oil, but there was still much to learn about processing, particularly for table olives, which were just then coming into food markets.

Botulism in processed ripe olives from California sickened 14 diners at a banquet in Ohio in 1919, and 7 of them died. The investigation of this disaster was thorough, but the market for domestic olives collapsed. Even though processors were urged to observe more rigorous standards, two more episodes of botulism were traced to the state before the canning problem was finally solved in the 1920s through the intervention of University of California food technology scientists.

UC's extensive work on safe processing procedures eventually saved the state's olive canning industry, but cheaper oil from the Mediterranean continued to dominate the U.S. market for olive oil throughout the 20th century. A few small producers like the Santoni family in Woodland (until 1951) supplied local markets, but their sales were eclipsed by bulk marketing from Europe.

For decades the California olive industry was based mainly on processed ripe black olives,

with about two dozen canneries centered primarily in the upper Sacramento Valley around Corning and in the mid-San Joaquin Valley. By the 1990s, however, most of the canneries had closed or consolidated, until there were just two remaining.

About this time increasing consumer interest in gourmet cooking and the health qualities of ingredients brought a new interest in olive oil. In 20 years U.S. consumption of olive oil more than doubled, rising from about 30 to more than 70 million gallons, more than 95 percent imported from Spain, Italy, or Greece. The expanding market even encouraged a Spanish company, seeing the potential, to invest in planting new olive orchards in the upper Sacramento Valley in 1999 and begin milling oil under the name California Olive Ranch. Others followed. Between 2004 and 2011 olive acreage in California grew from some 6,000 to more than 30,000 acres, much of it planted high-density for mechanical harvesting.

The UC Davis story is illustrative of the potential for a “new” olive industry in Yolo County. Many old olive trees on campus were becoming a problem as they dropped ripe fruit onto bike paths, causing cyclists to skid. In 2004 the University found itself paying about \$60,000 in legal fees and liability claims. The grounds department began to harvest the olives before they could drop, and university officials arranged to manufacture oil to cover expenses. Before long UC Davis olive oil products became popular as a fundraiser, generating an annual net revenue of more than \$80,000.

That income today helps to support the UC Davis Olive Center, launched in 2008 at the new Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science. This self-funded organized research unit now turns out valuable reports for the burgeoning industry and offers workshops and services to evaluate oil quality.

An annual California-only olive oil competition has also become popular at the Yolo County Fair--a fitting venue for such an event, since some of the old olive trees of the former prize-winning Blowers ranch still provide shade for the fairgrounds.

Several new olive mills have opened in Yolo County, such as one run by the Bariani family operation; the UC Davis Olive Center’s small but state-of-the-art Italian mill; and the big new Seka Hills Olive Mill built by the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation near their casino in the Capay Valley, which

will be available for local growers to process oil in 2013.

Will the new California olive industry be able to compete successfully with old-world oil? Some Yolo County producers are making that bet. With less than 5 percent of olive oil consumed in the U.S. produced here, there seems plenty of room to grow. Local growers hope that the new enthusiasm for olives this time will last.

References: Yolo County Archives folders on olives and The Olive in California by Judith M. Taylor, M.D.

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### Time Flies

Time Flies,...what a strange saying! Do you ever wonder how that term came to be used? According to a blog entitled “My Writing Notebook”, the proverb **time flies** can be “*traced back in English to 1386 in Chaucer’s ‘Prologue to the Clerk’s Tale.’ The earliest American appearance in print is 1710 in ‘Mayflower Descendant’*”.

Recently Roberta Stevenson, one of our board members, found a large envelope filled with receipts. When she brought it to our meeting, I looked at it and thought...wow!! This would make a great article....See if you can remember these activities and the prices....

- Feb. 17, 1970 check for \$173.50 to a Allen Transportation for a bus trip to Port Costa
- Aug. 17, 1970 receipt for \$3.91 from Laurence’s Stationery for cards and guides
- Oct. 7, 1970 receipt for \$9.07 from Cranston’s for paint for the school house
- Dec. 18, 1978 receipt for \$139.00 from The Printer for 4000 post cards for Mary’s Chapel, Wyatt Pavillon Theater, Gable Mansion, and Opera House
- Dec. 11, 1974 receipt for \$30.00 from Roger C. Franke, Artist and Lithographer, for 200 Mark Twain Posters
- June 30, 1971 receipt for \$33.52 from Frenchy’s Liquor Shop for the Home Tour (a little libation after the event???)

*Cont. on back page*

**Yolo County Historical Society**  
**P.O. Box 1447**  
**Woodland, CA 95776**

**Address Service Requested**

**Dated Material**

Names, such as Mary Stevens, Joanne Larkey, Nadine Salonites, and Roger Romani appeared as presidents. The receipts gave evidence of home tours and yearly calendars that were sponsored by the society. There were also many bus tour receipts to various historical locations in the area. But probably the most interesting receipt to me was a group of paper-clipped typewritten yellow sheets of paper with names and donations to the Woodland Opera House Fund. The list of names and the amounts of the donations, \$5.00, \$10.00, \$20.00 with a few \$50.00 again reinforced in me the power of the individual working together within an organization to save an historical edifice. Here is a note from "David" (President in 1970?) to Cora "Please give Norma (???) our warmest thanks. She is doing a great job (sending out thank you notes to

each and every one of the donors) and we appreciate it very much." What a treasure in a bunch of receipts, telling a story of an organization that continues to be vibrant and supportive of historical preservation in our community.

Kathy Harryman, Board member

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**If you have a story** you would like to share that relates to Yolo County, send it to [rbarzo@yahoo.com](mailto:rbarzo@yahoo.com) and we can include it as space is available. Photos are also encouraged! Our members have enjoying reading about the memories that have been shared in the newsletter of late.

**Vision Statement** *The Yolo County Historical Society strives to preserve, protect and acknowledge the diverse history of Yolo County through education, communication and advocacy*