

A History of

BENNETT VALLEY GRANGE

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Bennett Valley Grange # 16

On April 26, 1873 sixteen residents of the valley met informally at the old Strawberry School to discuss the possibility of organizing a grange. G. N. Whitaker, who probably spearheaded this meeting, was elected to act as secretary and to gather more information on the procedure of organization.

One week later the same group met again, only this time they were joined by J. Heber Plank, his sister, Susanna (the twenty-three year old school teacher at Strawberry School). Wine-maker Isaac DeTurk, D. E. Miller, Holman Talbot and his wife, Frances. By now, J. C. Hastin, one of the original sixteen dropped out.

The Thirteen men paid three dollars each and the eight women paid fifty cents each with the sole intention of becoming charter members. Secretary Whitaker was instructed to write W. H Baxter, general deputy for the Pacific coast, to invite him to formally organize the group. The possibility of a Grange in Bennett Valley, the first in Sonoma County, was now a reality.

One last meeting before formal organization was held ten days later. This was to be the last meeting held at Strawberry School. At this time Walter and Margaret Phillips, and E. Peterson paid their fees and joined.

The membership decided on the official name of Bennett Valley Grange. Officers were then elected for the year with Nelson Carr selected as Master - a logical choice as he was from a large family of Grangers in his home state of Wisconsin. In fact he had three brothers who were Masters of three different Wisconsin granges the same year he was Master here.

For the formal organization on May 27th, Whitaker extended the hospitality of his home to the new members as well as Deputy Baxter. At this meeting the last charter member was added, bringing the total to twenty five. Sara Lacque, who was fifteen years old at this time, set a decisive pattern of active membership by assisting Mrs. Whitaker in the preparation of the harvest feast that was served that day--a pattern that was to continue for over seven decades. Miss Lacque, who in time married a fellow granger, Peter Hanson, completed a full circle by being the last person to sign the charter and the last charter member to pass away. She died in 1944 at the age of eighty six after nearly seventy two years of membership.

It is not known just what foods Elmira Whitaker prepared in her kitchen that day. What is known, however, is that all the food served was grown on the Whitaker ranch and was provided to the membership without any cost to them.

Deputy Baxter started the meeting by stating the objects of the order. He then conferred the four degrees of the subordinate grange on the charter

members. The new officers were formally installed and Bennett Valley Grange was now on its own. The first order of business was to appoint a by-law committee and a finance committee. The meeting concluded with the thanking of Deputy Baxter; as noted in the minutes in the careful hand of secretary J. H. Plank "for the efficient and gentlemanly manner in which he conducted the exercises of initiation and conferring of degrees."

It was now Deputy Baxter's turn. As the recorded story goes it was at the end of the harvest feast that he was asked to say a few words. He declared in his own words "too full for utterance" but nevertheless found the words to make his sentiments known about the high quality of the meal. He then offered a toast to Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, calling them "the largest, whole-souled grangers in the state."

George Whitaker, obviously proud of his role in the inception of this organization, sent a letter to Santa Rosa's only newspaper-- the Sonoma Democrat-- a letter that appeared in the May 31 issue. He stated that Bennett Valley Grange was organized with a membership of twenty-five, and further stated "Bennett Valley has taken the lead in Sonoma County in the good cause and may the work go on until every tiller of the soil will sing to the tune of we are coming, some eighty thousand strong, to save our sons and daughter from the clutches of monopolists and rings."

By now a virtual chain reaction took place. Granges were organized

during the following months in Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Two Rock, Bloomfield, Bodega, Green Valley and Glen Ellen. While in Santa Rosa on May 28, preparing to organize the Santa Rosa Grange, Deputy Baxter received a letter from the National Grange Secretary. It stated that during the month of April, five hundred seventy one granges, along with three state granges were organized, bringing the total number of granges in the United States to slightly over four thousand.

At this time the Patrons of Husbandry was eight months short of its sixth anniversary and would continue an upward spiral of prosperity and growth.

Meanwhile in Bennett Valley, some three thousand miles from National Grange headquarters, another feat was about to unfold---just two months after its organization, Bennett Valley Grange announced its intention to build its own meeting hall.

A HALL IS BUILT

On June 24, 1873 a small article appeared in the center of page four of the Sonoma Democrat under the simple heading of BENNETT VALLEY. The article concluded with "the residents of Bennett Valley keep even with

the times, they occupy one of the most fertile and handsomest valleys in the county. They do not follow enterprises of public interest--they lead." The article was, of course, referring to a Fourth of July celebration that was scheduled to be held at Hughes Grove, a wooded area of madrone and oak trees located on the Eastern slope of Taylor Mountain bordering on what is now Grange Road.

A few days after the event took place, a reporter, who was present, wrote about the day's activities. He started his article by describing the wagons, carriages and single horsemen winding up the road to the grove in a long, dusty cavalcade. Once inside the grove, they were greeted by local vintner, Isaac DeTurk, who acted as master of ceremonies. During the course of the day's program, he introduced Susanna Plank, teacher at Strawberry School, who read aloud the Declaration of Independence. The reading was described as, "in a manner that won spontaneous applause. Her reading was correct, her voice fine. The listeners were unconsciously magnetized by her natural, but earnest manner." The program was then followed by refreshments, dancing and general socializing--an activity well known in the valley.

Towards late afternoon, as the activities were winding down and the crowd was beginning to leave, a man he described only as "an old resident" approached the reporter. In the course of conversation the reporter was told,

“Well, the Fourth of July comes but once a year, but there is something new in Bennett Valley every day.”

Was this statement, in some strange way, a prophecy of things to come? Little did the residents realize as they were leaving they were not only saying farewell to their neighbors, but to Hughes Grove as a public gathering place as well. Three weeks later, John Hughes would donate an acre of this grove to the grange for the building of their new hall.

From the very beginning the question of a suitable meeting place was probably foremost in the minds of the members. The new grange was at a distinct disadvantage as there was no facility in the valley that could be utilized for meetings or social events. Both Santa Rosa and Strawberry schools, being one-room schoolhouses, were limited in space. To continue to meet in members homes, large as they probably were, would not be realistic if the organization was to expand. One obvious answer then remained.

Toward the end of June and into the first week of July, the members were surveyed as to what the minutes referred as the “hall question.” On July 12 a building committee consisting of Charles Lyman, J. Heber Plank, and Benjamin Laque was appointed by Master Carr. They were authorized to present a plan and a cost estimate of building a hall. With this committee now in place, Nelson and Hannah Carr were free to leave for

Napa to attend a conclave which would organized the California State Grange.

Two weeks later with the Carrs' back in Bennett Valley and a new state grange formed, a meeting was held at their home. John Hughes, who just submitted his membership application, offered on acre of land from Hughes' grove to the grange for a building site. One stipulation was that the grange would bear the cost of surveying and recording the deed. The offer was immediately accepted and the committee was instructed, as recorded in the minutes, to "build a hall without unnecessary delay."

They went to work immediately and spent the next two weeks visiting the lumber mills of western Sonoma County, comparing prices and quality of lumber. At Smith's Mill located in Coleman Valley, west of Howard's Station (now Occidental) they found just what they were looking for, at a price, they felt would satisfy the membership of this new financial limited organization.

By now all preliminary preparations were completed and construction was ready to begin. One last detail remaining was the delivery of the lumber to the building site. The lumber would be transported from Smith's Mill by oxcart, a perilous journey which involved crossing a steep grade at one point. David Collier probably spent the better part of two days or perhaps longer, driving his team. When he finally arrived in Bennett Valley, he was

to be paid the handsome sum of twelve dollars for his efforts. Unfortunately, he had to wait six months before the money was actually placed in his hands.

The lumber that would be used in the interior and trim around the windows and doors was purchased from the Korbels Brothers, who recently opened an outlet in Santa Rosa. Their advertised specialty was "building ornament and Fancy work", milled at their property on the Russian River, a few miles East of Stumptown. Although they also advertised "lumber to build sixteen feet of fence for One dollar", the building committee bypassed them in favor of the firm of Heald and Gurney, paying all of Twenty-two dollars for fencing lumber. The village of Stumptown would grow around their mill on the Russian River and, in time, would be named Guerneville. Mr. Heald was not forgotten -- the city of Healdsburg to the Northeast was named for him.

The Korbels Brothers, who were by trade cigar makers in their native Bohemia, would enter the lumber business in 1872 when they began clearing their Russian River property of the dense timber that grew there. By 1883, when the bulk of the land was cleared, they decided to plant grapes. This eventually led to their experimentation with wine making, and when this proved successful, it escalated to the product for which they are known nation wide to this day--premium champagne.

Towards the end of September work was ready to begin. Joseph Plank,

father of J. H. Plank, was engaged as building foreman along with paid carpenters John Lyon, Benjamin Lacque and G. N. Whitaker. Actual construction began on Monday, September 29, and progressed at a good pace for the next few weeks.

On November 1 the decision was made to celebrate the eighth anniversary of the founding of the National Grange on December 4 by dedicating the new hall. Because of his long time friendship with S. T. "squire" Coulter of Santa Rose Grange, a friendship that went back to the early days of the Sonoma Country Farmers Club, it was probably G. N. Whitaker's wish that members of Santa Rosa Grange assist in the dedication ceremony. One other decision was also made at that time--one that may of brought delight to some, but not to others. As the minutes stated "the members take nothing stronger than coffee, tea, or cider to the celebration."

Towards the middle of November the hall was nearing completion and on the fifteenth the first meeting was held in the hall by candlelight. By now plans were underway for a gala celebration in true Bennett Valley style, with members of Santa Rose Grange assisting. No detail was to be spared--there was even a committee appointed to purchase hay for the horses. Ezra Slocum Carr, professor of Agriculture at the University of California at Berkeley, was asked to deliver the principle address and to dedicate the hall. For dancing that evening an orchestra from San Francisco, under the

direction of Professor Loyd, was engaged.

Plastering of the interior, under the direction of Joseph Childers, was underway. However not all of it, along with some of the painting, done by D. S. Slyke, would be completed by dedication day. True to the Bennett Valley style, ready or not, the dedication would take place as scheduled.

As in all events, sometimes fate has something to say about the proceedings. Once again the specter of **“something new in Bennett Valley every day”** would come forward. Only this time the **“something new”** would be a record snow storm in the Santa Rosa area, as well as many parts of Northern California, and as far to the west as Sacramento. When the snow started to melt, it caused Matanzas Creek to overflow flooding the dirt roads in the valley, turning them into a quagmire of mud and potholes. Fortunately, this new twist of fate did not dampen the spirits of the grangers-
-the celebration went on as planned, as if nothing out of the ordinary occurred.

A HALL IS DEDICATED

Early morning December 3, a young Santa Rosa girl upon awakening sat up in her bed. Looking about, sensing something was different about this day, she immediately got out of bed and ran down the hall toward the front door and threw it open. As she gazed out, her eyes grew wide with amazement. She immediately closed the door and ran back down the hall to

her father and exclaimed "Oh, just come and see how fast the frost is falling."

What she thought was frost was actually snow, and this little girl, along with the majority of Santa Rosans found it difficult to believe it actually was snowing in Santa Rosa. Usually, if it does snow in this area its only for a short time and the snow melts almost immediately. This was not the case this time. Throughout the day the snow fell and seven inches in all was measured by professor Hardy at Santa Rosa's Pacific Methodist College.

Before long downtown Santa Rosa, along with the surrounding area, began to resemble a Currier and Ives winter scene. Bewildered residents started to gather on street corners and soon the inevitable happened-- snowballs started whizzing through the air landing on anyone that happened to pass by. J. C. Clark appeared on the streets riding in a sleigh, his horses decorated with bells that were described by the Sonoma Democrat as "Not especially harmonious in sound."

By now trees, were beginning to bend down from the weight of the snow, a slight unfamiliar in this locale. Returning from the Russian River area with a full load of lumber, David Collier described the eerie scene of fallen trees blocking the road and the cracking sound of limbs breaking as "wild and alarming."

To the North on Dry Creek Road near Healdsburg, the roof on the

Hamilton District School collapsed inward under the weight of the snow. However, to the Southeast in Bennett Valley, the roof on the newly completed grange hall held fast. True to the Bennett Valley spirit, it would take more than a major snow storm to stop this new building from being dedicated.

Although snow fell all day causing many problems with the dirt roads, the committee met at the hall and continued preparations for the crowd that was expected the next day. When their work was finished, they left for home, no doubt with much optimism that this storm would pass and all would go according to plan for the formal dedication of the new hall.

What was dedicated on December 4th was the main hall and the two ante-rooms that still exist today. The Sonoma Democrat described the new building as “well proportioned and roomy. Size 30 x 60 feet on the ground floor, from which two ante-rooms are perfectly square.” Not true, one measures 12 x 14, while the other is 12 x 16. (It would have to be in order to come up to a 30 foot width).

The article pointed out that this was the first hall built and “exclusively owned by grangers in this state” and gave special mention to the small membership for the undertaking. This mention was well deserved—Bennett Valley Grange had 29 members on dedication day.

Early in the afternoon members and guests, braving a rain storm, started

to arrive in buggies or on horseback. Once the horses were stabled, they proceeded up the main staircase to a small veranda and then through double oak doors that led into the main hall. Once inside they sat down at tables for what was described as a "well spread board." What actually constituted this "well spread board" was never recorded. What was written was "those who know the Bennett Valley people need not be told that the supper will be all that the most fastidious epicure could desire."

With the meal finished and presumably the crowd in a mellow mood, S. T. (squire) Coulter of Santa Rosa Grange, who acted as master of ceremonies, announced a song to be sung by an impromptu choral group organized for this occasion. When the singing was completed, a poem was read by R. A. Thompson of Santa Rosa Grange.

Professor Ezra Slocum Carr of the University of California's Department of Agriculture was then introduced and delivered the principle address of the day. It was described as an "instructive and practical address which was frequently applauded." He closed with complimentary remarks to the members for their undertaking and then he formally dedicated the new building. For his efforts he was paid twenty dollars, mainly for travel expenses from Berkeley to Bennett Valley. Professor Carr forged a strong tie with Bennett Valley Grange. In August of 1874 when the regents of UC Berkeley tried to remove him from his teaching position, the grange

unanimously supported him by a strong resolution citing his removal as a great blow to the farmers of California.

After the completion of the formal ceremonies there was time for socializing before the dance began later. A few people left, presumably they were not interest in dancing. After 7 pm more guests started to arrive and by 10 pm there were six sets of dancers on the floor enjoying Professor Lloyd's music.

As it grew dark the three double lamp chandeliers that ran the length of the hall were lit, along with the six wall sconces. Gas lighting was just coming into vogue and some Santa Rosa homes now had this new type of lighting. Since no gas line existed in the valley, the only alternative was coal-oil. Although Thomas Edison perfected the incandescent light bulb in 1879, it would be a full forty-eight years later before the hall would experience its first electric light.

Perhaps the unsung heroes of the day were the members of Professor Lloyd's orchestra. Their long day began sometime after lunch when they met at the foot of Jackson Street, near San Francisco's infamous Barbary Coast, where the side-wheeler steamer Sacramento was docked. At two pm they boarded the ship and left the city for the two and one-half journey up San Francisco Bay, then to San Pablo Bay and finally up the Petaluma River docking at Donahue's landing located on what is now Lakeville Highway,

some six miles south of Petaluma.

Once at Donahues they, along with all their instruments and equipment, boarded the SF&NP train for the twenty-three mile journey to Santa Rosa, stopping at no less than seven stops before finally arriving at Santa Rosa's depot at the foot of Fourth Street. The normal three hour and forty minute trip on this new Donahue line from San Francisco to Santa Rosa probably took longer that day due to the heavy rains that fell all afternoon.

In Santa Rosa they off-loaded their equipment, this time onto a wagon for the trip to the hall. As they began the final phase of this six mile journey all went well as they proceeded up Fourth Street, it was paved. However, once they left the bridge at Santa Rosa Avenue and First Street, near Luther Burbank's garden, downtown Santa Rosa was behind them and they now had to struggle over what was left of Santa Rosa Avenue and Bennett Valley Road which by now was pure mud. The Sonoma Democrat stated they made it to the hall in time for the start of the dance around Nine PM.

Upon arrival at the hall it would seem their troubles would be over, but this was not the case. A new piece of music that they had never seen before entitled "The National Grange Quickstep" was placed on their stands, courtesy of Boggs Brothers of Santa Rosa, and was to be introduced that evening.

Judging from the press coverage, the dance was a huge success and the

crowd enjoyed the evening. According to grange records the dance netted the sum of \$28.85 for the building fund.

As a final footnote, the dance was still in progress when the Sonoma Democrat's reported left for home. He was later informed that it continued until daybreak, probably because of the reluctance of the orchestra to relive the three hour and forty minute journey back to San Francisco. Beside that, the train didn't leave Santa Rosa until 7:30 AM.

Three meetings were held in the new hall during the remainder of 1873. One important bit of Nineteenth Century business that would probably still hold up today in the Twenty-first Century. John Hughes was appointed janitor and was to take charge of the hall and its contents, and, as recorded in the minutes, "to lighten his labor none of the members use tobacco in the hall."