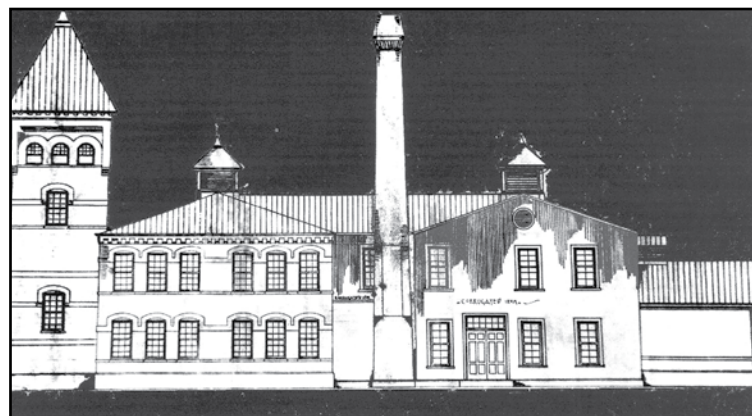


Historian Skip Sommer has restored many historic properties in Marin and Sonoma Counties including The Great Petaluma Mill, The Riverhouse Restaurant and Larkspur's famed Lark Creek Inn. Skip is an honorary member of Heritage Homes of Petaluma and has been the History Editor of The Petaluma Post for 20 years. He is a Realtor with CPS/Golden Land Realty in Petaluma. E-mail Skip at skip-sommer@hotmail.com

STORIES FROM THE PAST

The Great Tannery Fire of 1906

by History Editor Skip Sommer



HARNESSES AND SADDLES

Cannot be made better, or bought cheaper, than are sold by

GWIN & BRAINERD,

Wholesale and Retail Dealers in all kinds of Harness and Saddlery Goods.

Buying our goods direct from manufactories in the East has enabled us to successfully compete with all others.

We keep a complete assortment of HILL'S CONCORD HARNESSES, also do all kinds of Carriage Trimming. We invite at all times a careful examination of our stock.

GWIN & BRAINERD,
Washington St., Petaluma.

Awarded First Premium by Sonoma and Marin District Agricultural Society 1867, 1868, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1876.

When Mexican land grantee, General Mariano Vallejo, had tens of thousands head of cattle roaming his ranch, he would send the hides to Boston for processing and the tallow to South America to be made into soap and candles. This trade was not unnoticed by local merchants and by the time California was granted statehood, there were 4 tanneries operating in Petaluma.

Jacob Wick operated the largest at that time, processing 8,000 hides a year into harness and shoe leather. Gwin and Brainerd was the premier local harness and saddle maker, producing over 500 sets of harness a year. Petaluma harness and saddles were known for quality throughout the West. Their ads boasted, "Cannot be made better, or bought cheaper".

Also benefiting from the Tanneries were the shoe, boot and glove factories in Petaluma. The local M. Berger Co. produced over 500 dozen sets of leather gloves a year and employed "12 persons, - Mostly Female."

An area of East Petaluma

now bordered by Jefferson and Lakeville Streets was the industrial center of the town. It housed 3 tanneries, 2 shoe factories, and the silk mill and employed several hundred people. It was the dream of local banks and the town council to make Petaluma the Industrial Center of the Pacific Northwest. They came very close to succeeding.

On April 17, 1906, the circus train had just arrived in town at 3AM, when some roustabouts noticed smoke coming from the huge three-story Petaluma Tannery building. As quickly as possible, they spread the word and also attempted to quell the blaze themselves. The firefighters arrived shortly, but the hose pressure and the personnel were not enough and the huge frame building was an inferno within an hour. Realizing that it was gone, the next worry was that the fire would spread to adjoining buildings -- he silk mill, the shoe factories, and the Sonoma and Poehlmann Tanneries, plus the cars and freight on the adjoining railroad spur. The Petaluma Argus said, "The tannery was a roaring Furnace" when the railroad pulled the 15 freight cars to safety. Part of the Carlson-Currier silk mill was on fire and spools and boxes were lost. The California Shoe Factory was smoldering, but eventually saved. The silk mill, the railroad, the Steamer Gold, and the fire company whistles woke the entire town and everyone who could, pitched in to help. "The "city was as bright as day," said the Argus about the blaze. The

cause was never known.

1906 was a very prosperous year in California and these mills and factories were booming. The loss to the tannery was total and large.

Thirty men were thrown out of employment. The Tannery had been established six years previously by Anderson & Ott, and later the Anderson interest was purchased by then Petaluma Mayor, W. R. Veale. The land for the building had been donated by the City and, apparently, Mayor Veale saw no conflict in that. At the time of the fire, the business was unable to keep up with demand for hides.

When the great San Francisco earthquake hit just five days later, there were people who felt that Fate "had it in" for this area. Sebastopol, Bloomfield, and Santa Rosa were practically leveled with great loss of life, and San Rafael was severely damaged that day. In Petaluma, however, damage was light. The silk mill tower (there was only one then) was slightly damaged and architect Brainerd Jones was hired to supervise the repair. He pronounced it safe to reopen on April 25.

Attempting to recover the merchandising spirit of the times and to help offset these catastrophes, local millinery firm Phillips & Tough (located "under the town clock") advertised that week that they offered "drawers, all made in a sanitary factory by clean American girls" and they now had on board "An expert corset fitter who will fit you free of charge." Business almost as usual, I guess.

Your favorite British Comedies on KRCB TV22 New lineup starting this month.

After You've Gone

Jack-of-all-trades Jimmy Venables is probably the only man in Britain who gets divorced and ends up with his mother-in-law. That's not how he planned it, but since when does life go according to plan? When his ex-wife volunteers to go to East Africa to help the victims of a natural disaster, weekend-dad Jimmy agrees to take care of their two teenage kids full-time in an attempt to win her back.

Tuesdays at 7 PM

Last of the Summer Wine moves to
Wednesdays at 7 PM

As Time Goes By moves to
Thursdays at 7 PM



To the Manor Born

As beneficiary of Grantleigh Manor, the snobbish Lady Forbes-Hamilton becomes a happy widower upon the death of her husband's creditors, bank, and the government, she can no longer afford to maintain the family's hold on the estate. Reluctantly, she sees it auctioned to Richard De Vere (formerly Bedrich Polouviccka), a millionaire bachelor of Czechoslovakian extraction. Fridays at 7 PM

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