

How the Nut Tree grew to be a landmark

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, September 10, 2006

Last week at Solano County's exhibit at the State Fair, volunteers handed out nuts, candy, and paper fans announcing the opening of the new Nut Tree. Many visitors expressed their delight at the news that the Nut Tree was opening again, often followed by a precious memory of visits to the famous Nut Tree of old.

One of my favorite stories was that of a gentleman with \$5 left on his hundred-dollar gift certificate who wanted to know whether he could now redeem it at the new Nut Tree.

Ten years have passed since the Nut Tree closed, fondly remembered by longtime residents. By now there are scores of new residents who never experienced all that made the Nut Tree so special.

The Nut Tree's history started as one of the first fruit stands in California on July 3, 1921. It was one of those years when nature made farming a challenge, with frost in early spring damaging most crops. This was followed by an extended heat wave in June, which ripened the fig crop overnight and made it unfit for shipment.

Helen Power decided to sell her crop under a black walnut tree along Lincoln Highway. Husband Ed "Bunny" Power erected a display table with the help of a six-foot prune tray. Two flower bouquets, an American flag, a rocking chair and the Saturday Evening Post completed the setup.

Car travelers quickly embraced the opportunity to rest and refresh themselves on the long, dusty road trip. Helen and Bunny Power added sandwiches, water and lemonade to their fruit offerings and provided a 250-spray wagon to cool down overheated radiators. They named their new business "The Nut Tree."

Within a month, the young couple realized that their little fruit stand had a future. The following year, Bunny constructed a small building, open to the front with a deep porch, and a kitchen.

From the beginning, the couple emphasized a creative display of their quality products and excellent customer service. Besides fruits, walnuts and vegetables produced on their farm, they sold honey, ice cream, dried fruit packs and a fruit confection.

The "California Fruit Confection" became one of their early specialties. It was

developed by Helen's mother, Hester Harbison. The varieties consisted of dried apricots, pears, figs, and a mix of all three fruits. The ground-up fruits were mixed with spices, made into a paste, rolled up, dried and then cut into small pieces. In the early years, Hester would grind and mix the confection in the kitchen of her home, Harbison House.

Bunny, who knew how to create papier-mâché containers, prepared several attractive displays for the dried fruits and confections. Within a year, he had developed a sales catalog and had obtained contracts with East Coast outlets to market this specialty.

The Reporter in Vacaville noted on Jan. 5, 1923: "But few of the residents of this vicinity realize that a business which had its modest beginning just about two years ago, seems likely to make Vacaville famous throughout the country. We refer to The Nut Tree and its various products."

That same year, Helen Power wrote in a letter: "This confection has proved very popular, and a demand for it is created all over the country. It is now being handled by some of the leading fancy groceries and department stores in Omaha, Denver, Chicago, Cleveland, Albany, Buffalo, New York and Boston, and a sales manager, F. C. Bilberger, is employed in extending the market."

By 1924, the Nut Tree gift catalog included 23 different gift packs, including a papier-mâché gold nugget and a covered pioneer wagon, both filled with fruit and nuts.

Over the next years, the couple added a tea room, managed by Helen's sister, Edith. They hired several waitresses, including Miss Fond, Miss Vernon, and Lena Yolo.

Julia Harbison, Helen's youngest sister, operated the soda fountain. Fresh-squeezed orange juice was one of the popular drinks served there.

The Nut Tree slowly continued to grow. By the 1930s, the building had become a permanent construction. Colored striped awnings covered wide porches. A patio with an open fireplace was added during the 1940s, allowing visitors to enjoy meals al-fresco. By then, the restaurant offered breakfast, lunch and dinner.

After the end of World War II, Helen and Bunny's three children, Ed Jr., Bob and Mary Helen, entered the business, bringing their own ideas and talents to the Nut Tree. Helen and Bunny created a partnership agreement with their children in 1948.

During this period, focus slowly began to shift away from purely a restaurant catering to passing motorists to an emphasis on family-friendly activities.

Ed Jr. created and built the first rocking horses, which quickly became a Nut Tree signature attraction. Other child-friendly attractions followed, capped by the opening of the toy store in 1952 and the installation of the first Nut Tree train.

When the airport opened in 1955, the train route was extended to ferry visitors flying in to the Nut Tree to the restaurant area.

Similarly, the restaurant and its offerings began to change. A new all-electric award-winning kitchen opened in 1949. At the same time, the dining room expanded to include three differently themed rooms, the Spanish Room, the Mexican Room, and the Main Dining Room.

One of the first items created in the new setting were little loaves of freshly baked bread, an idea pioneered by Bob Power and made from a family recipe. The loaves were served on a wooden board and quickly became another signature for the restaurant.

Intriguing new food ideas appeared, such as the presentation of hot and cold foods on one plate, the imaginative use of local fruits and vegetables, Western Wheat and other novel ideas.

In 1953, the partners hired former Crocker Art Museum Director, Don Birrell as the Design Director. He was able to translate the family's vision for the Nut Tree. As a team, they created a fun-filled environment that provided visitors with an enchanting experience. Their commitment to customer service and their goal to provide each visitor with a memorable experience were the foundation for all decisions.

In the process, every aspect of the business was designed and redesigned again. Don introduced many designers and artists and their works to Nut Tree visitors.

Excellent design became a hallmark of the dining room. Dansk silverware graced the tables, dishware was specially designed for specific dishes, and guests enjoyed their meal while lounging in stylish Charles Eames chairs. Every dish was presented based on a visual template developed by Don.

Don and his coworkers traveled around the world, bringing back new ideas. The Nut Tree Plaza of 1961 featured an ice cream pavilion with its fluted roof and twinkling lights, an idea adapted from similar pavilions in the famous Tivoli Gardens of Copenhagen, Denmark.

Nut Tree, as it was known by then, continued to grow and develop.

In 1980, the first Great Scarecrow Contest took place. Over the years, this beloved event drew thousands of visitors. Few realized the tight overall design, attention to the minutest detail and major effort on Nut Tree staff to create the consistent imagery associated with the event.

By then, what was once uniquely Nut Tree, appeared in other businesses. Innovative Nut Tree food ideas had become mainstream.

The restaurant could no longer support an organization that had grown to more than 500 employees. The cost to reinvent the Nut Tree concept was prohibitive, eventually forcing its closure in 1996.

Handing out those advertising to fans at the State Fair and watching people's faces light up with hope that Nut Tree was once again open was a wistful reminder of the impact it had on people's lives. Nut Tree was the vision created by a special group of people, always innovative, fun-filled and enchanting.

That Nut Tree is gone. The new Nut Tree Villages and Park now faces the challenge to become that special place that will create memories for the next generation.

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Glorious memories of the Nut Tree

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, April 20, 2003

Driving by the old Nut Tree the other day brought back a few memories as my 90-year-old mother, Iris, remarked, "What happened to the Nut Tree?"

Her recollections go back to 1950 when we relocated from North Dakota to California via the old "Historic Route 40."

Tired and ready for a break, we were flatlanders in awe of the incredible mountain range we had crossed earlier in the day in a pick-up-truck and an old Buick, each loaded to the brim with all our belongings. Then we spotted the Nut Tree. That was our first experience with Vacaville's famous landmark.

Our connection to the Nut Tree continued through the years. My father had owned and flown airplanes for as long as I can remember and he and my mother would fly from San Lorenzo to the Nut Tree to have lunch with my wife and I. My dad is gone now and mom has moved into our fair city and is amazed at all the changes that have taken place in the last quarter-century.

Of course the Nut Tree has been around a lot longer than the memories of our family and for most of the folks who live here today. The weed-choked lots and deteriorating 80-foot-long sign leave little clue of the once-popular business that attracted people from all over the country and, in fact, the world.

It all started with a small roadside fruit stand in 1921 alongside what was then the Lincoln Highway and grew into a business that was known all over the country. Alas, the Nut Tree is no more and many of its buildings soon will be dismantled to make way for an innovative new development, but the Nut Tree Airport will live on in name and fact.

The airport was nonexistent when we first stopped here in 1950, but an impromptu landing of a failing plane in 1930 planted a seed in an entrepreneur's mind for the future facility. You might say it was much like the seed planted by Sallie Fox some 80 years earlier that grew to become the symbol of the famous Nut Tree Restaurant and Gift Store.

Airplanes were still a popular curiosity in the '20s and '30s when Ernie Smith flew into the Dixon Airport and was asked by a group of locals if they could go for a ride. Smith,

who had plenty of barnstorming experience under his belt, including having been the first to fly from the continental United States to Hawaii, was quick to agree.

The little two-seat, fabric-covered aircraft roared into the sky from Dixon with his passenger and headed in the direction of Vacaville. As so many of the early craft were prone to do, the engine began to develop a problem and Ernie quickly looked for a safe place to land. Following the Lincoln Highway, he spotted an open area near a eucalyptus grove on the Nut Tree Ranch. During the landing he damaged a wing, but both he and his passenger, who most likely was very frightened, were unhurt.

The Power family, including Edwin Sr., Helen, Ed Jr. and Robert rushed to see the unexpected arrival. Several photos were taken of the family with Smith's flying machine and the fascination of flying apparently was planted in their minds, although it took another 25 years for the seed of an airport to grow to fruition.

In 1955 Ed Power Jr. was responsible for building the first Nut Tree landing strip as an attraction for pilots to the already popular restaurant. It was a smart move and many pilots began to use the airport, described as one of the most innovative private airports in the nation. It even got a two-page spread in the October 1960 issue of the Saturday Evening Post.

The first Nut Tree Railroad was built in 1951 and was run by Edwin "Bunny" Power's brother, Joe. The train, originally built for the pilots' convenience, was smaller than the one most folks remember today as the "No. 5" version that was introduced around 1971. While most tourists paid to ride the train around the complex, pilots who landed at the airport rode for free from the landing strip to the restaurant and back. It was a marvelous success, as was proven by the thousands of folks who rode it each year.

In 1974, the Power family stepped back from the day-to-day operation of the Nut Tree with the formation of the Nut Tree Associates, an operational organization within the Nut Tree. Some of the employees said that it was the beginning of the end of the Nut Tree "family" as they called themselves.

The restaurant and gift shops continued to operate until about 1994 when the news broke that the Nut Tree had lost approximately \$5 million.

Legal action among the partners ensued and resulted in a settlement that called for the sale of the business in 1995.

The Nut Tree closed on Jan. 24, 1996. The "Nut Tree family" employees, many of whom had worked there for decades, were suddenly out of work, although some were absorbed by a subsidiary, the Coffee Tree, located across the freeway.

Although the Vacaville landmark is closed, part of the legacy was to remain and continue to carry the name "Nut Tree."

Earlier, in 1968, the city of Vacaville had begun to look into the possibility of buying a piece of land for an airport. The search eventually turned toward the Nut Tree Airport as the logical facility. After negotiations with the owners, they agreed to dedicate the runway to the county as long as the name "Nut Tree Airport" would be retained. By 1972 plans and improvements to the airport were in progress. The runway was extended and new parking areas and hangers were built and improvements have continued to the present.

The Vacaville City Council, decided to buy the Nut Tree Property in 2000 in order to control development of the area. It appears to have been a wise decision, as the latest plan for the area appears to be well-thought-out and will retain the historic Harbison House as part of the development.

For 75 years the entrepreneurial skills of the Power family made a major contribution to the historic legacy of Vacaville and even though most of the Nut Tree facilities will be gone, it will be remembered with considerable affection by the many who have passed through its doors.

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