

FAIR OAKS, THE LAST FIVE YEARS  
1970 - 1975

Reinhart Knudsen

In November 1970, the intersection of Sunrise Boulevard and Greenback was a bleak, dry field inhabited by nothing except jackrabbits, brush and a few oak trees. It was so dreary, in fact, that the 300 dignitaries who were about to celebrate its changing destiny, elected to do so in a cozy meeting room in the Senator Hotel, 15 miles away in Sacramento.

There they sipped their martinis and watched the bulldozer move the first patch of soil via a closed-circuit television. A shopping center way out there in the boonies, really! But the developer was enthusiastic. He said there were 195,000 people living within a five-mile radius of these open fields and within five years there would be over 230,000. He was much too modest. Within that five-mile radius was the little community of Fair Oaks, soon to be swept into the great melting pot known as Sunrise, and never to be the same again.

The Sunrise Mall changed every thing. It was the new commercial and cultural whirlpool that swept up the residents of Fair Oaks, Citrus Heights, North Highlands, Roseville and Orangevale and intermingled them into a huge community that would eventually diffuse and destroy the old community boundaries and identities.

By 1975 there were 101 shops, including four huge department stores, within the confines of the Mall. That year 17 million customers were clocked through its doors. Some 2,500 people were employed there. In fact, these plus several thousand more employed in establishments surrounding the mall, brought the total employment of that small area well above that of Aerojet-General, the previous largest employer of the north area.

Directly across Sunrise to the west, another equally huge complex was coming into being. Already there was Ward's department store, and now Bird Cage Walk, with 80 additional shops and restaurants, was beginning to rent space to tenants.

Sunrise Boulevard, itself, had become a financial center. There were 14 banks and savings & loan companies between Greenback and Madison. Radiating outward from the retail area were big new office buildings, one of them totaling 100,000 square feet, and behind them were huge new apartment house complexes.

In the southeastern quadrant of the whirlpool, Fair Oaks was changing too, but you wouldn't know it to look at its own business district. It

remained the same as it had been over 20 years ago and proudly insisted on staying that way. A movement to ban parking on the downtown streets in order to give a "mall" effect, was hooted down at a public meeting and has not been heard from again. But, sooner or later, changes were due to come. The south-west corner of Winding Way and Sunrise, with a new post office building, Safeway store, restaurant and savings & loan company was about to become a busier shopping center than the former "downtown." Downtown was actually a nostalgic illusion. Main street for all practical purposes had moved to the Sunrise Mall. There you went on hot days or stormy days, to that air-conditioned Great White Way, to meet your friends, walk up and down, window shop, sit and watch. There was a movie house in which to park the youngsters, a nearby rollerdrome and big open spaces were almost a continuous circus of art shows, auto exhibits and ski jumping demonstrations.

As a business center, Fair Oaks had been relegated to a small peripheral function. It was a suburb of a suburb. So far as the residents of Fair Oaks were concerned however, it was a different story. They had happily discovered that they were an elite community. On the average they were better educated and made more money than most other areas in the county. A 1970 study showed they had the highest median income, \$12,500 of any community and the second highest median home value, \$23,700. By the end of 1975 this had jumped enormously. The county assessor reappraised most of the community during 1974 and 1975 upping valuations from 50 to 100 percent.

It was the community where everyone wanted to live, if they could afford it. So the population grew. In the five years from the official census in 1970 to a special census made in 1975 its population grew 14.4 percent, going from 15,463 to 17,701. It might have grown even more except for the deliberate efforts on the part of its residents to maintain low-density housing and a rural character. Fair Oaks residents were quick to sense that they had something special and moved promptly to preserve it.

It was the first community in the county to have an active Community Council. This was an experiment on the part of the Board of Supervisors to bring more "local input" into planning decisions. The 15-man council was appointed by the Board to develop a community plan and to review all requests for zoning changes. It did this job so competently and forcefully that it achieved considerable respect in county government. It was the ferocious watchdog of local development and growled menacingly at the slightest sign of a violation.

The Sunrise Mall brought more than people and prosperity. It brought

automobiles. The automobile made the suburbs possible, but it polluted the air, crowded the streets and dispersed the family. Like other suburbanites Fair Oaks residents developed a strange love-hate relationship with this mechanical contrivance. The traffic on Sunrise grew enormously. At the Fair Oaks intersection it jumped from 14,000 cars a day in 1970 to over 25,000 in 1975.

Bus service didn't help much. In fact it brought new problems to downtown Fair Oaks. Commuters drove to Fair Oaks, parked their cars and left them while going by bus or carpool to some other destination. In retaliation local Merchants had "Two-Hour Parking Limit" signs placed on local streets for the first time in their history. Though traffic was obviously building up, Fair Oaks residents and the Community Council, fought to keep the streets narrow. "If people don't drive through Fair Oaks because it's too difficult we couldn't be happier." However, it was only a matter of time until the residents themselves were having difficulties. A land use study made in 1972 found that the community was still relatively vacant. Only 24 percent of its land was developed residential. Over 55 percent was still in school grounds, parks, agricultural or just vacant. Even with low-density controls, the population was due to jump from 17,700 in 1975 to over 28,000 by 1990.

Even more ominous is the more rapid increase in housing units in proportion to population. Fair Oaks had followed the national average with a population per household of 3.4 up till the seventies. The special census of 1975 showed this had dropped to around 2.8. Young people were leaving home and starting new homes. New apartment houses were springing up in the community. A 270-apartment complex opened during 1975 on Sunset just east of Sunrise. Another sprang up just north of the Fair Oaks school. More households meant more cars and more travel even though the total population rose only slightly.

Nevertheless the Community Council was successful in its efforts to keep streets narrow, mainly because the financially strapped county didn't have the money to widen them anyway. Residents applauded the county action in abandoning three proposed freeway routes. A Northeast Transportation Corridor committee was formed to study alternatives to the automobile for the freeway right-of-ways.

During 1970-71 however, Sunset Avenue was widened. There was a battle over some 200 trees that the county wanted to remove. Public pressure managed to save 80 of these.

The old Fair Oaks bridge had fallen into such a sad state of repair that it contributed nothing but a hazard to the transportation problem. The

county moved to tear it down, but a public outcry by Fair Oaks residents against the destruction of one of their favorite landmarks caused the Board of Supervisors to appropriate \$100,000 to repair and repaint it for use by pedestrians, horses and bicycles. In its bright new form it was reopened on September 4, 1974.

In early 1970 the Park District moved to build an amphitheater in Plaza Park. When bids were received however, the board was shocked to find them twice as high as original estimates. In typical Fair Oaks fashion they threw them all out and decided to build it themselves. They appropriated \$12,000 from the park district budget, used park labor, accepted donations from the community including \$1000 from the Chamber of Commerce. It was dedicated the following year just in time for the annual Fiesta celebration.

A park survey in 1973 allowed that swimming was the most popular recreational activity among local residents, but Fair Oaks still did not have a public swimming pool. During 1973 vociferous protest by nearby residents resulted in the turndown of a plan for a tennis club on Sunset, while only a few blocks away a hospital for treating alcoholics was built.

Schools were having their problems. There was a vast expansion of teenagers at the same time that the population of elementary school ages was dropping. There was a rapid adjustment to life styles. During the early 70's student dress, long hair and sex education were explosive issues. By 1975 no one was worrying much about any of them. Vandalism and violence had taken the stage.

The Masonic and Elks lodges sought to build a lodge hall on land they owned just south of Madison on Fair Oaks Boulevard. Protesting residents caused the Community Council to reject the proposal. The lodges thereupon sold the property to the county to build a 12,000 square foot Fair Oaks-Orangevale regional library which was begun in October 1975.

The San Juan Suburban Water District, which supplies the water for Fair Oaks, went through a stormy period. Angered at a tax boost, a recall election was held which replaced three directors. Their replacements were hardly in office before the State Board of Health ordered substantial improvements to the water distribution system. Thereupon a \$10 million bond issue was passed to provide funds for a new treatment plant and replacement of former ditches with pipelines.

In 1975, for the first time in its history, the water district found itself confronted with a strike. Its 17-man field crew had joined a labor union and walked out after negotiations with the board broke down. The board merely hired replacements and ignored the whole thing. By the end of 1975 it was

pretty well forgotten.

The continued existence of Phoenix Field airport was doubtful. The manager had run afoul of the IRS and was found guilty of evading proper tax payments. The airport was thereupon offered for sale to a subdivider for \$750,000. This brought on a fierce protest from residents who either flew or preferred airplanes to subdivisions. The Community Council refused to change the airport zoning to accommodate a subdivision so the whole question was heading for another confrontation with the Board of Supervisors.

The old Slocum house on California Avenue, which had been sold to an interior decorator, was sold again in 1975 to the Kenneth Bansemers who planned to convert it into a restaurant with a historical motif.

For a brief period during 1970-71 Fair Oaks had a second newspaper called the Aquarian Times, dedicated to the idea of printing good news only. Apparently no one cared for good news because the paper failed. The other community newspaper, the San Juan Record had become part of a chain of "Green Sheets" covering every community surrounding Sacramento. By 1975 it had grown so big that larger quarters were necessary. The company moved to a new site in Rancho Cordova, leaving the community without a newspaper plant in its own area for the first time in over 40 years.

A local resident was ordered to get rid of his pet lion after it escaped from a cage and wandered around the neighborhood frightening the children.

The Fair Oaks Rotary Club, miffed by county health regulations, quit conducting their famous barbecue at Fiesta Time. However, a couple of years later they got back into it by acquiring a shiny mobile kitchen that met all requirements.

The old post office building had a brief fling as a playhouse but failed for lack of patronage. It now houses a number of small shops.

Looking ahead it was impossible to see anything but continued growth, more people, more houses and more business. With all these stresses, the question was...could it still retain its sense of community?

A Local Government Reorganization survey found that half the residents of suburbia had lived there less than five years and 77 percent couldn't name their county supervisor. Nevertheless they voted 5 to 1 against consolidating with Sacramento in a 1974 election.

## FAIR OAKS in the 70's

The face and character of the Fair Oaks Village area was changing rapidly. Old names were disappearing from the scene.

In 1973, J. W. (Bill) Pugh, Assistant Vice-President-Manager of Crocker National Bank, retired after 23 years of working at the same desk for six banks. He was replaced by Robert Stevens.

'73 also saw the move of Edgett Motors from the Woods property to their own property in Rancho Cordova.

William N. Melvin, who opened Melvin Realty in 1958, retired in 1975 and leased his office to El Dorado Savings and Loan who moved across the street in 1976 (4250 Sunrise Blvd.). The William Lyon Company moved into the Melvin Building.

Don Logan, owner of the F. O. Florist, moved from the Murphy Building to the beautiful new shop he had built on Sunrise in 1974 (4201 Sunrise Blvd.).

Mr. and Mrs. Jack Pontius, owners of The Village Green, a charming gift shop facing the Plaza, retired in 1975. A shop of the same name opened on the corner in the Murphy Building,

George Payne, who headed the Fair Oaks Volunteer Fire Department and saw it grow from one piece of make-shift equipment to the present sophisticated fire fighting facility, retired in 1976.

In 1976 the Fair Oaks Library moved from its downtown location to a much larger new building on the south-west corner of Fair Oaks Boulevard and Madison and acquired a new name, The Fair Oaks-Orangevale County Library.

The early 70's saw many changes in the Fair Oaks School Departments. Virgil Alread, George White, Thomas Sparks and C. V. Hart retired. In 1976 Dr. Norton Archer, who had been a dentist here for 43 years, retired, and his practice was taken over by Dr. Perry Kolander and Dr. Robert Koch.

Gordon Tillett, who had operated a cleaning shop in Fair Oaks for 32 years, sold his building and retired.

Everett Nardinelli, who had owned a hardware store here for 20 years, sold his business to Ronald Leonard.

John and Mary Bell sold the Fair Oaks Bottle Shop to Gary and Delores Wolfesmith.

Robert Beach Insurance moved to San Juan Avenue and Winding

Way.

Charles Gaston moved his TV shop out to Auburn Boulevard.

Lloyd Wilson sold the Buckhorn Barber shop property and bought a ranch in the northern part of the state.

The Shire Road Pub which succeeded the Fair Oaks Market, became a popular spot for the younger set until it burned down in June, 1977.

During the same month, Larry Smart, owner of Western Auto store for many years in the community, held a liquidation sale in order to move out for building remodeling. Whether he would reopen somewhere else he had not even decided himself

The empty spaces in the business area were being filled with antique shops and somehow it seemed that Fair Oaks itself was on its way to becoming an antique shopping center.

#### Thursday Club in the 70's

Club activities started out with a different type of membership morning in September 1970 - a Membership Fair chaired by Mae Kelly.

Another unusual membership affair was "A Membership Morning in the Park" chaired by our President Isabel Cornell in 1975.

A \$500 scholarship was set up as our main philanthropy and we have had the pleasure of getting acquainted with the recipients and following their college careers.

We have had our usual lovely fashion shows at Whitney Ranch and Northridge Country Clubs - an event enjoyed by the ladies of our community.

Our membership had decreased during this time - a trend found in women's clubs throughout the country - but we are still a fine club with an acknowledged place in the community, following our club motto, "Friendship-Culture-Service."

#### As For Our Country - The 1970's

We in the 70's have very possibly lived through the most shocking period in American History. We have seen a White House disgraced with the resignation of a corrupt vice-president. We have heard a President of our

country face us on TV and lie over and over again to us. We have been astounded at the revelations of the Watergate Affair and the Ellsberg trial. We learned that government agencies, the CIA, the FBI, and the Department of Justice have been involved in unethical activities. Added to these are the bribery scandals - the Lockheed and the General Telephone cases.

Pornography has become the main theme of our books, plays and movies. There is a breakdown in moral values that is affecting our homes and our youth. Terror is still flowing out of our ghettos and crime is rampant across our country. Surely the time must be ripe for us to change our direction.

Perhaps the Bicentennial offers us a chance to reaffirm our faith in the ideals of our Founding Fathers, and we can look ahead and seek to build a better society in the third century of our independence. Hard work, a respect for others, and a return to ethical values should help accomplish this. It is a goal well worth the effort because, even with all our problems, the United States of America is still the best to come along so far!

This is the way we are - May 13, 1976.

May God Bless America - and keep her and protect her!