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BLUE WING INN - SONOMA COUNTY

Registered Landmark #17

by

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BLUE WING INN

Blue Wing Inn, now occupied by the Sonoma Chamber of Commerce, is one of a group of historic buildings and monuments which make a sightseeing trip to Sonoma interesting and romantic. Like many California ghost towns it was forgotten for a time. Being "discovered" again by those who recognized its significance, Blue Wing Inn was registered on January 18, 1932 as Landmark No. 17, one of the 300 Historic Landmarks and Monuments officially recorded by the State of California.

It is said that Blue Wing Inn was the first hotel or public house north of San Francisco. It was first known as "Cooper's Place" and the "Sonoma House," and was opened as an inn by James Cooper and Tom Spriggs a short time after the American conquest, 1846-1847.

An interesting bit of information has recently been brought to light by research done by Professor George W. Hendry and Dr. J. N. Bowman of the University of California. They have made extensive studies of Spanish and Mexican adobes and ranch houses found in the nine Bay counties of California. The Blue Wing Inn, they say, was built in three separate sections. Although it is not generally known, the first

section was built between 1836-1840; the second part added from 1846-1849 and a third addition was made in the early '50's. These dates were determined by measuring the adobe brick and by a study of their color and of the kind of joints made between the bricks.

It is believed that this was one of the buildings built by General Mariano Vallejo when he founded the pueblo of Sonoma.¹ About the time the first section of the inn was built the barracks were also put up under Governor Figueroa's orders. It is told that Figueroa visited Vallejo soon after the Mission Sonoma was confiscated in 1834, following Mexico's secularization decree of 1833.

The pueblo of Sonoma was occupied, in the main, by early settlers sent to General Vallejo as colonists. These settlers, with whom the General had to deal, were unfortunates who had been condemned to five years service on the Sonoma frontier for horse-stealing in Monterey. Vallejo is said to have commented:

From 1834 to the arrival of Commodore Stockton in Monterey, the frontier of Sonoma was the Centa of Alta California; it was customary to

1. A. M. Cleveland, The north bay shore during the Spanish and Mexican régimes, 145-146. University of California, thesis, 1920; E. Bryant, What I saw in California, 314-315; Bancroft collection: Sonoma County pamphlets, Bancroft Library.

send all restless and rebellious spirits there, and with pleasure I can assert that without using severe measures, I succeeded in converting all my involuntary guest....

Thus, one can picture the environment of the historic Blue Wing Inn just prior to the period (1846-1847) when the house or tavern was opened as a public wine and gambling rendezvous by Cooper and Spriggs. We can imagine the Blue Wing Inn as it looked October 14 (1846):²

From the embarcadero we walked, under the influence of the rays of an almost broiling sun, four miles to the town of Sonoma. The plain which lies between the landing and Sonoma, is timbered sparsely with evergreen oaks. The luxuriant grass is now brown and crisp. The hills surrounding this beautiful valley [Valley of the Moon] or plain, are gentle, sloping, highly picturesque, and covered to their tops with wild oats....

The quartel, a barn-like adobe house [Probably what is now known as the Blue Wing Inn], faces the public square. The principal houses in the place are the residence of General Don Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, his brother-in-law, J. P. Leese, an American [from Ohio], and his brother, Don Salvador Vallejo....

The town presents a most dull and ruinous appearance; but the country surrounding it is exuberantly fertile Most of the buildings are erected around a plaza, about two hundred yards

2. Bryant, What I saw in California, 314-315.

square. The only ornaments in this square are numerous skulls and dislocated skeletons of slaughtered beeves, with which hideous remains the ground is strewn....

I noticed outside of the square several groves of peach trees, which were planted here by the padres; but the walk and fences that once surrounded them are now (1846) fallen....

The Blue Wing Inn, opened by James Cooper and Tom Spriggs, is two stories high. Bryant in his journal, says that "the barn-like adobe measured about 60 x 136 feet, which latter dimension fronts the plaza."³ It is further stated that "the building is now (1859) mainly used as General Vallejo's wine cellar."⁴

During the American barrack days much activity centered around "Cooper's Place" or hotel. In later years the first Sonoma stages stopped here with travelers, including the actress, Lotta Crabtree, who once played in Petaluma.⁵ The town of Sonoma was garrisoned from 1846 until 1851.⁶ It was during this five year period that the historic Blue Wing Inn flourished and as suddenly died.

Although the story is told that members of the

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3. News item in San Francisco Bulletin, November 5, 1859, Bancroft Seraps: California counties, Santa Cruz to Yuba, 217, Bancroft Library.
 4. Ibid.
 5. C. G. Murphy, The people of the Pueblo, 131-132.
 6. R. A. Thompson, Historical and descriptive sketch of Sonoma County, California, 16.

Joaquin Murrieta gang while on horse-stealing raids, frequently met in the barroom of Blue Wing Inn, there is no authentic evidence that the bandit himself was ever in Sonoma.⁷ Murrieta's henchman, "Three Fingered Jack" Garcia, tortured and killed two Americans near Petaluma Creek, between Sonoma and Bodega, in 1846, but there is no record to substantiate the fact that Garcia or his gang ever congregated at this historic hotel. The story created a dramatic legend.

Meanwhile, the presence of American officers who were stationed at the barracks from 1846 to 1851, frequented the hotel and barroom, and helped to make the Blue Wing Inn famous. Among the officers who mingled with the Trinity County gold miners at the inn were General "Fighting Joe" Hooker, General Sherman, General Stoneman, General Lyon, General Smith, and Lieutenants Revere and Derby.

The steamer Georgiana, operated by Captain Hoenshield, ran three times a week between San Francisco and Sonoma. It transported many of the Blue Wing Inn celebrities of the day, as well as hundreds of the "rough and ready" gold miners en route to the Trinity mines on the "Sonoma Trail." A line of stages owned by Peter Peterson

7. N. W. Burns, The Robin Hood of El Dorado, 53.

left Blue Wing Inn every Saturday for Bodega and returned next day.⁸ "At that time (1846-1851) there were more people in Sonoma than Yerba Buena, now San Francisco, and it was generally thought that Sonoma would, in time, be a big city.⁹ It is said that Cooper brothers in later years often recalled how the miners coming to town after months at "the diggings" waxed sentimental at the sight of children, and gave them nuggets.¹⁰

The Blue Wing Inn took gold dust in payment for meals and lodgings. A pinch of gold would pay for a drink. "Many a bag of gold dust was weighed by Cooper on his scales, and paid for at the current price. The women folks in the Cooper hotel swept up enough of the precious waste each day to keep them in pin money."¹¹ The same authority said:

The scales were moved to the ranch later bought by Cooper but disappeared. However, the iron safe which long stood in the Blue Wing was treasured by the family throughout the years and has recently /1930's/ been presented to the pioneer museum established within the walls of the historic hotel by the Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce. The old inn is in good state of preservation and for many years after its doors closed was used as a residence and winery.

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8. Thompson, Historical and descriptive sketch of Sonoma County, California, 16.
 9. G. Breitenbach /written by his father, F. B./, "political history of Sonoma city," Grizzly Bear, XV, 1. June 1914.
 10. Murphy, The people of the Pueblo, 133.
 11. Ibid.

Even after the rendezvous was closed, the Blue Wing Inn was the scene of many dramatic episodes. The town of Sonoma faced the problem of municipal debt. A meeting of citizens was held at the present Blue Wing Inn. Here ¹² a committee was appointed to request the city council to inspect all the records and audit the books in order to determine the amount of such indebtedness. It is said the committee decided that the City Marshal should suspend collection of taxes until Assessor J. A. Reynolds provided a new and correct assessment list. The previous tax being sixty cents for every hundred dollars worth of property. "There must have been considerable feeling among the citizenry because of the situation, for the council's resolution not only charged the assessor with supplying an inaccurate assessment list but flatly accused him of all-around incompetency."¹³ Meanwhile, James Cooper, the proprietor, had retired from the Blue Wing. Cooper took up ranching on a farm southwest of Sonoma,¹⁴ following the death of his partner Thomas Spriggs in 1851.¹⁵ Soon after Cooper was established on part of

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12. E. L. Finley, ed. History of Sonoma County, California, 353.
 13. Ibid.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Bancroft, History of California, V, 731.

the old Petaluma Rancho, which bordered the western city limits of Sonoma, he met with a tragic death. As the story goes, it is said Cooper had objected to the manner in which his sons were treated by the teacher of the district school. A quarrel ensued. In the argument the schoolmaster fatally stabbed the Sonoma pioneer.¹⁶ The schoolhouse of the district where Cooper's slayer taught, was on the historic Sonoma-Petaluma stage road about four miles southwest of Sonoma.¹⁷

Another episode which contributed largely toward the fame of the Blue Wing Inn was the publicity printed during the opening of the "Sonoma Trail," 1850-1852. The wagon road led inland from Sonoma to the Trinity mines via the Humboldt Bay country. It is said the L. K. Wood party, after its separation from that of Josiah Gregg, followed south along the courses of the Eel and Russian rivers.¹⁸ From here the Trinity or "Sonoma Trail" led south through the Sonoma Valley near Hooker Canyon and Sonoma Creek to the San Francisco Bay. The first authentic account of this trail appears in the report of the expedition of Redick McKee, United States Indian Agent, who passed through the

16. Murphy, The people of the Pueblo, 165.

17. Thompson, "Map of Sonoma County, 1877," Historical and descriptive sketch of Sonoma County, California, (inside front cover), Bancroft Library.

18. O. C. Coy, The Humboldt Bay region, 65.

region during the fall of 1851.¹⁹ The guide to the McKee expedition was Thomas Sebring. He was a seasonal backwoodsman and trapper. Sebring was one of the companions of L. K. Wood who had returned to the Humboldt Bay region early in 1850 with the original Sonoma party. From the report of the McKee expedition, the route taken by the party can be traced in a fairly satisfactory manner. Early in the summer of 1850 the "Sonoma Trail" was urged by the people of Sonoma as the most direct approach to the Trinity Mines. This occurred during the flush times of the "Cooper House" or Blue Wing Inn.

One can picture the secret-like caucuses held in the picturesque old barroom by General Vallejo and U. P. Leese with his "men of the press," Cooper and Spriggs. A notice from Sonoma signed by "many Citizens" was published in the Alta California, April 22, 1850.²⁰ Between lines the notice appears as though it was concocted in a barroom. Inasmuch as the "Cooper House" or Blue Wing Inn was the only live rendezvous north of San Francisco at the time, the colorful tavern-hotel was no doubt the place where the "many citizens" conceived the idea.²¹ The notice said:

19. Coy, The Humboldt Bay region, 65.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

We wish to inform the public of San Francisco that we have returned from Trinity, and that the route by land is now open; time of travel four days by wagon, and by horses two or three days. There will leave this town on Thursday, April 25th, seven wagons for the Trinity Diggings and teams will run regularly once a week leaving on Thursdays. Persons going to the Trinity mines will find this the best route.

"From the remarkable claims set forth in behalf of this trail there can be little doubt that the motive prompting this action was not so much to benefit the traveling public as to bring profit to the people of Sonoma."²² It is further pointed out that for a time these statements succeeded in attracting some of the travel to this new route. However, its disadvantages soon became known. Many of the pioneer miners who had worked in the Mother Lode in 1849, strangers to the Sonoma-Trinity country, became embarrassingly stuck by the rugged mountain barriers which separate the Sonoma Valley from the north. What with the men losing much of their previously made stakes at the tricky gambling tables of the Blue Wing Inn, or their gold dust for drinks, the "Sonoma Trail" was no longer considered as a best route. Nevertheless the barroom notices concocted in the old Blue Wing, in addition to filling the purse of proprietors, helped to bring settlers into the upper Sonoma Valley region as late

22. Coy, The Humboldt Bay region, 65.

as 1859. Thus the short-lived prosperity of the Blue Wing Inn from 1846 to 1851 gained its fame.

Blue Wing Inn has many interesting neighbors. In addition to modern recreation and camping facilities offered in the town of Sonoma, and the colorful pioneer beauty surrounding the old Blue Wing Tavern, there are twenty-four other historic adobes still standing within the vicinity of Sonoma for the visitor or tourist to see.²³ Among these are the old Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma containing a museum of pioneer relics; the Sonoma barracks erected 1835-1836; General Vallejo's headquarters, two blocks west of northwest corner of plaza, built in 1850-1851; the H. A. Green residence (now a jail); the Henry D. Fitch residence at the rear of the present telephone company's office; the J. P. Leese residence; the John Ray residence, one block east of the Mission; Marie Goethe residence; and the home of Andromico Vallejo.

Another famous landmark and point of interest near the site of the Blue Wing Inn is the Bear Flag Monument on the northeast corner of the plaza, dedicated in 1914. This was erected to commemorate the raising of the Bear Flag of the California Republic, June 14, 1846. Then of course

23. Abstracts from the work of Professor Hendry, University of California⁷, History of Sonoma County, California, 223.

one should not forget to visit Jack London's memorial library and ranch in the heart of his "Valley of the Moon"; the Mineral Springs; the "Fighting Joe" Hooker home and ranch; the Sonoma State Home; the Secret Pasture; the Pythian Home; Luther Burbank's home; the Petrified Forest; the Geysers,²⁴ and the old cemetery where soldiers are buried. These and other points of interest are easily reached from Sonoma.²⁵

Blue Wing Inn is on the south side of Spain Street in Sonoma, Sonoma County, California. It is located 43.9 miles north of metropolitan San Francisco via the Golden Gate Toll Bridge,²⁶ U. S. Highway No. 101 to state Route 37, via the Blackpoint Cut-off, and Highway No. 12 through Shellville, home of the colorful Sonoma County annual rodeos.²⁷ In driving from San Francisco take the Golden Gate Bridge, Richardson Avenue route, (which was Lyon Street approach).

Highway No. 101 starts at Lombard and Broderick streets.²⁸ The Blackpoint Cut-off road to Sonoma is part

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24. Points of interest in and near Sonoma /Folder7/. Compiled by Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce, Sonoma, 1939.
25. Murphy, "Historic Sonoma in the Valley of the Moon," Grizzly Bear, LXI, May 1937, 4.
26. Map: North Bay counties, California State Automobile Association. San Francisco, 1939.
27. Oakland Post Enquirer, June 9, 1939.
28. H. M. Gousha company, Map: East Bay cities, 1939. (Shell Oil Company of California).

of the historic Petaluma stagecoach route of the 1860's; first explored by Captain Quiros in 1776; opened by Father Altimira in 1823; and known as the "Sonoma Trail" by the Trinity County gold miners, 1850-1852. The other route from the south, formerly the Sacramento Valley-Fort Sutter or "General Vallejo Trail" (1839-1846), is via U. S. Highway No. 40; from Oakland about 46 miles. This is also a paved road, across the Carquinez Toll Bridge, thence via State Route No. 29 to Napa, and No. 12 to Sonoma. The historic San Mateo Bridge routes from the old Santa Clara Valley and Monterey Mission trail is likewise a colorful road leading northeast to the picturesque Sonoma Valley.²⁹ Part of the latter was opened by the Spaniards in 1769. Either one of the three routes are historic trails. They offer various beautiful, romantic scenes en route throughout the year.

29. San Mateo bridge Maps obtained from Oakland Tribune touring bureau on June 6, 1939.

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