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Huge crowd gathers for City Hall centennial

Neal Ross | Sonoma Valley Sun

The weather was cool but the applause was warm as hundreds of people filled the Sonoma Plaza lawn to sing “Happy Birthday” to the park’s oldest enduring inhabitant.

“Welcome to the centennial celebration of our City Hall,” Sonoma City Historian and master of ceremonies George McKale told the Sept. 9 evening crowd.

The event marked 100 years to the day that a larger, more boisterous crowd gathered for the building’s 1908 dedication – with horse races, a grand ball and free barbecue.

But while Tuesday evening may have been short on refreshments (except for chocolate and vanilla birthday cake, and whatever was foraged from the surrounding Farmers Market) it was long on history. Display stands showed early Sonoma photographs, accompanied by snippets of bygone recollections from telephone party lines to a mailing address consisting only of someone’s name and “Sonoma, California.”

McKale drew snickers from the crowd when he read from a 1909 Chamber of Commerce brochure boasting of “a magnificent City Hall costing \$27,000 with two fountains in the foreground.” He ended his comments by asking attendees to sign a book with their names and what City Hall meant to them – “For me, it’s a place to pay my water bill” – that would, he hoped, be read at the building’s bicentennial in 2108.

After McKale spoke, salutations were offered by General Mariano Vallejo (as portrayed by Sonoma actor and history maven George Webber) who extolled the virtues of having City Hall in the center of town in order to keep government accountable to the governed. The Sonoma Valley High School Madrigal Singers, led by Barbara McElroy, harmonized on “Dear Old Hills of California,” a yearning melody sung by Vallejo’s daughter Luisa Emparan when the City Hall cornerstone was laid in February 1906.

Former city manager Pam Gibson narrated a construction-eye view of “the building that almost wasn’t,” which included bidding problems, the 1906 earthquake – which sent Sonoma-quarried stone to rebuild San Francisco – and a four-month stonemasons’ strike. But despite the challenges, City Hall was finally completed, with electrical wiring, indoor plumbing and brand-new brass spittoons for the courtroom.

Next up was Michael Millerick, who opened a window into living history by introducing a group of Sonomans between the ages of 80 and 92 whom he called “the elders of our tribe”: Antoinette Mazoue Blanc, Margurite Mazoue Bottini, Margaret Curotto, Rosalie Chelini Gibson, Ray Giorgi, Emilie Ettelson Polit, Audrey Gale Raymond, Claudine Pheifer Meyer, Helen Millerick Larson, Marie Viviani Martini, Rose Scarafoni Millerick, Evelyn Banchemo Montaldo, Cedora Jones Scheiblich, June Picetti Shepard, Anita Viviani Tomasi, Newt Dal Poggetto, Helen Marioni Dunlap, Ig Vella and Muriel Shainsky Robbins.

“They and their families represent the thread and fabric of our city’s culture ... the shoulders upon which we now stand and celebrate the anniversary of our beloved City Hall,” Millerick said.

At the younger end of history, Prestwood Elementary third-grader Emma Maggioncalda was recognized for creating the winning entry in this summer’s City Hall Centennial poster contest. Official greetings were also offered by First District Sonoma County Supervisor and former

Sonoma Mayor Valerie Brown, as well as congressional aide Wendy Frieseld representing Mike Thompson and Lynn Woolsey.

Current Sonoma Mayor Joanne Sanders noted both the recent City Hall upgrade (exterior painting and internal fix-ups) as well as the many groups which had contributed to the modern Sonoma Plaza – the Sonoma Womens Club for landscaping, Native Sons of the Golden West for the Bear Flag statue, and the federal government for constructing the Plaza duck pond.

“They haven’t continued to fund the duck pond,” Sanders said, prompting loud laughter and applause.

But Sanders also sounded a serious note, reminding the crowd that “today, we are creating the future ... (with) the same investment previous generations bequeathed to us.”

Shortly afterward, Sonoma Public Works Director Milenka Bates unveiled the new Sonoma City Hall sign over the front door — its brass-on-black letters contrasting with the old carved wooden tablet. The crowd applauded, McKale asked the madrigal singers to lead everyone in “Happy Birthday,” and the affair ended around 6:15 p.m. with a long line for cake.