

# Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan



## The Brick Block

**B**rick making in Livermore most likely began with the brickyard of Alexander Esdon. Sometime in 1870, Esdon dug a small clay pit in north Livermore and erected two crude firing kilns there, according to Dan Mosier, an expert on early Livermore Valley bricks. From this brickyard, employing about 25 men at one point, came the material for three structures, which together were known as the Brick Block. They were erected along Railroad Avenue and North Livermore Avenue, not far from the brickyard.

The opening of the first and largest building, erected by Alexander Esdon for W. Waterman & Company of San Jose, was celebrated on 30 April 1875. In the evening a brass band played for the Firemen's Grand Benefit Ball held on the second floor. Livermore firemen received the profit from the dance to help finance a truck house. Esdon's handsome brick structure included about 24 long windows on the upper floor and stood at the northwest corner of Railroad and North Livermore Avenues. The only extant picture of it does not show details of the lower floor because they are concealed by a wooden awning supported by columns.

G.W. Comegys came in June to manage a cash store on the first floor. Livermore's earliest newspaper, the *Livermore Enterprise*, called the business opening the "dawn of a new era in the commercial history of Livermore." Previously, merchants had allowed farmers credit until their animals or crops were sold, sometimes a year or more. The cash store, however, insisted on payment in 30 days. The large store downstairs, 60 x 40 feet, was needed to house various available farm goods and equipment, such as plows, seed sowers, cultivators, and wagons. Comegys carried all the merchandise available in a general store except for drygoods. One corner of the building was a separate room meant for a future bank, and a vault was installed there. Meanwhile,

Chris Gardemeyer used the room as a saloon.

In October 1883 Comegys and his partner sold their shares in the store to the general public. The building was now called the Farmers' Union. Many of Livermore's prominent land owners and farmers invested in the cooperative. According to the *Herald*, the business "served as a clearing house for farmers who brought their produce to the store and received in exchange groceries, household utensils, and hardware." At first business was booming. A one-story addition was built north of the existing building. But when the venture failed six years later, local shareholders blacksmith N.B. Holmes, Wells Fargo agent J.L. Mitchell, farmers G.C. Stanley, Daniel Inman, John Beck, and many others were paid off at only 20 cents on the dollar.

The second floor, reached by an outside stairway on the north side of the building, included some offices and a large social hall, called the Palace Hall, capable of seating 650. After the building became the Farmers' Union, a stage was added to the upstairs hall, then renamed the Farmers' Union Theater. Early resident Zylpha Bernal Beck remembered that the second floor social hall was used as a theater by local organizations as well as traveling groups, with footlights made of kerosene lamps with tin reflectors. The Livermore Collegiate Institute made use of the hall several times for special presentations and graduation ceremonies; eighth-grade graduation exercises of the Livermore Public School were also held at the hall.

Moving pictures exhibitions, the first in Livermore, were shown in the hall. As a come-on for their annual masquerade ball in January 1902, the Foresters showed films of the battle of San Juan Hill, Niagara Falls, and the post-hurricane ruins of Galveston.

After the bankruptcy of the Farmers' Union, the first floor stayed vacant for the most part. Chris Gardemeyer moved out to his own building; the hoped-for

bank did not appear. With the opening of the Sweeney Opera House in 1904 on First Street, another large hall was available to the public, and gradually even the upper floor of the Farmers' Union, as the *Herald* put it, "lapsed into the silence that reigned in the deserted stores beneath." The Farmers' Union, once the pride of the community, became an eyesore. In 1929 the ground floor addition was demolished. After long negotiations with the San Francisco owner, the rest of the building was razed in 1939.

Two smaller buildings on either side of the Farmers' Union were also made of Alexander Esdon's bricks, and these have survived. One of them, the oldest remaining brick building in Livermore, was erected west of the Farmers' Union at 2160 Railroad Avenue. Jerome Vostrovsky opened his one-story drygoods/ clothing store (60 x 26 feet) here in May 1876 to supply those needs not covered by Comegys's store. Many other owners and uses have followed, including the present Charlotte's Web. The other building, a two-story one financed by Chris Gardemeyer in September 1876, remains at 141 N. Livermore Avenue, north of the Farmers' Union site. The original bricks are covered with stucco, probably applied in the 1930s. It, too, has had many uses, including saloons, apartments, a tattoo parlor, and currently the Tri-Valley Housing Opportunity Center. Thanks to Larry Mauch for his articles in the Livermore Heritage Guild newsletters.

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