Modesto Coffee Club, the Place to Be!

One dollar got you one share and one vote in the Modesto Coffee Club but most people in town and visitors had access to its inexpensive coffee and meals, reading rooms stocked with magazines and books, game room, speakers, discussion groups, an employment office, invitations to huge banquets for as little as 25 cents, and an extensive social network. The club was frequented by many including women, young adults, and Modesto’s successful businessmen. There is no evidence, however, that people of color used the services or the facility.

The club incorporated and opened on February 4, 1909 at 910 10th Street (pictured above). It was one of about a dozen coffee clubs that eventually opened in California, part of the California Coffee Club Movement. The movement was started by Ernest Fox, who brought the idea over from England, though the Women’s Christian Temperance Union opened something similar in Modesto in 1884. Fox opened the first of his clubs in San Diego in 1896. He was much involved in the Modesto club, coming to town often to meet with community leaders and to train the people who would eventually run the club. His idea was to have a place where people could go to relax and socialize that was an alternative to though not a replacement of saloons.

The stated purpose of the Modesto club and the others was a “house of refreshment, recreation, and amusement where no intoxicating liquors, cigars, or tobacco in any form shall be sold.” And “to provide an uplifting self-sustaining and self-enlarging social center where people of all classes can rub shoulders doing each other good and not knowing it.”

The Modesto club was a success and it quickly outgrew its space on 10th Street. One of Modesto’s prominent businessmen, T. K. Beard, hired well know San Jose architect, Frank Wolfe, to design a building specifically for the club at 910 11th Street. The club moved into the new two-story facility Sept. 1, 1913. (Continued page 3)
Modesto History Center Launched

The 150th anniversary of the founding of Modesto is a great time for the beginning of a new organization that will focus specifically on Modesto’s history and historic preservation.

The Modesto History Center, a project of the Modesto Art Museum, has as its mission to support the well-being of the people of Modesto through research, preservation, and education about the city’s history and built environments including architecture and landscape.

The center will be conducting and facilitating research into the history of Modesto, working to preserve city history, documents, objects, structures, and landscapes, and teaching about Modesto’s history, the value of preservation, and how to do historic research.

You are invited to participate, but if you do not want to be an active member, learn what the group is uncovering about Modesto in this newsletter and the Modesto History Journal.

https://modestoartmuseum.org/programs/modestohistorycenter/

National Preservation Month in Modesto

May is National Historic Preservation Month across the United States. In Modesto, that means highlighting some of the heritage buildings in our community and drawing to our attention those that have been forgotten or hidden.

Eddie’s Drive-in at 4th and H Street is one of those forgotten buildings. So is the building at 710 10th at G, what you might know as the Downtown Arena or the Fireproof Garage. It opened January 1, 1920 as Fisk and Davis Oldsmobile dealership. You might know it by its decoration:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/12142184@N07/3782281248/

Modesto has other interesting industrial buildings including the Mission Revival style Rodesko Building at 517 7th Street from 1919,

https://www.flickr.com/photos/12142184@N07/3781462365/in/photostream/

And a similar building down the street at 710 7th Street, from about 1922, has a long history as an auto repair or mechanics shop.

https://goo.gl/maps/mwBbhm1sHDCDMW

The Modesto History Center will be surveying and cataloguing as many of Modesto’s old buildings as it can find over the next several months.
SP Depot Developments Look Promising

After a well-attended public meeting in December 2019, where many Modesto residents spoke of their concerns with the initial proposal, the city presented a new plan for the rehabilitation of the 1915 Southern Pacific Railroad Depot at a public meeting on March 4, 2020.

The city has decided not to remove most of the interior walls of the depot. This is a significant change to the original plan. The historic character of the main waiting room and the woman’s retiring room will be maintained. Architectural details will be repaired, and the film on the trackside windows will be removed bringing more light into the interior. The two double doors between the main waiting room and the tracks will be removed and stored. As of the March meeting, it is still the intent of the city to enclose the arch colonnade on the track side, but they propose to do it in a way that is reversible.

Concern was voiced about the large oak mission style benches in the main waiting room. The March meeting adjourned with no details on whether they would be reused. Though not original to the time of construction, they are appropriate to the style of the time.

The City of Modesto web page with information about the depot project is http://www.modestoarexpress.com/338/Downtown-Transit-Center-Improvements-Pro

Eddie Curtis opened Eddie’s Drive-in March 19, 1937. Though it wasn’t the first drive-in, it is probably the oldest drive-in building still standing in Modesto and one of the city’s few remaining Art Deco buildings. Top photo of Eddie’s was taken by Modesto photographer Oscar Mayo, bottom photo is what the building looks like today.

(Coffee Club Continued): On the first floor were “rest rooms”, we would call them lounges, one for men and the other for women to relax and socialize. Behind them were the 300-seat dining room and kitchen. The 2nd-floor housed offices, game room, and library. Fox described the Modesto Coffee Club facilities as the most palatial in the state.

Woman’s voting rights groups met there, so did the Socialist, the Farmers’ Union, and the Modesto Realtors group, among many others. It was popular with visitors to Modesto who used the club to rest and find an inexpensive meal. Some years the coffee club thrived, other years it struggled. It was forced to close August 1920, $4,000 in debt. There is a much bigger story here that waits to be researched and told.

One thing is clear, most of those who got involved in founding and keeping the club open were interested in making Modesto a better place to live. They wanted to improve the well-being of the community and of the individuals who lived here and for a few years the coffee club did make Modesto a better place to be.
Calendar of Events (All Events Postponed)

The following events are postponed and will be rescheduled.

**Modesto House History Workshop** (Advance Registration is Required)
With Ben Jameson-Ellsmore
Convention and Visitor Center, 1008 12th Street, Modesto
Admission is $10 cash at the door.
A hands-on workshop where you will uncover some of the history of your house or property and learn how to continue the research on your own. Modesto properties only.

**Southern Pacific Depots of Modesto & The San Joaquin Valley**
With Jean Guy Dube
Prospect Theatre, 1214 K Street, Modesto
Admission is $5 cash at the door.
Enjoying hearing about the history of Modesto’s Central and Southern Pacific Railroad depots.

Fun Facts about Modesto’s Past

Professor Chester, a twenty-year-old aeronaut, made the first hot-air balloon ascension over Modesto on July 4, 1886. Immense crowds filled the streets, sidewalks, and buildings to watch the balloon ascend about 1,800 feet and drift about a mile south toward the river. On October 28, 1893, the aeronaut Professor Vaughn ascended in a hot-air balloon over Modesto. When he reached 3,000 feet, he parachuted down landing on Plato’s Store on 10th Street.

In October 1895, the Modesto Dramatic Club, a group of all Black performers, made their first appearance at the Armory in Modesto. They presented the comic drama *Love’s Labor Not Lost* and the farce *The Colored Senators: An Ethiopian Burlesque* by Bert Richards to a crowded house. Admission was 15¢, 25¢ for reserved seats.

Modesto once had a thriving Chinatown that welcomed all residents of Modesto to its festive new year celebrations.

The Chautauqua with its lectures and music came to town attracting huge crowds from 1913 to 1924?

Only four reporters and a few others witnessed the first aeroplane flight in Modesto at 5 am on August 22, 1911. It was a short test flight in a field near the cemetery and the aeroplane reached an altitude of about 40 feet.

It’s true, in 1870, the Central Pacific Railroad originally named our town Ralston to honor William Ralston, president of the Bank of California and financer of the rail line to Modesto. It comes as a surprise to most people, however, that reports from the time say the change of the name to Modesto was done “in retaliation” and “in derision” mocking Mr. Ralston for rejecting the honor. Ralston, never known for his modesty, had allowed a town in New Mexico to be named for him earlier that year.