

# Downtown puts its history in spotlight



John Coyle stands by the elevator at the Title Building in downtown Fairfield, May 7. The Title Building is a recently renovated historical building. (Aaron Rosenblatt/Daily Republic)

By [Barry Eberling](#) | June 08, 2014 |

FAIRFIELD — John Coyle’s 84-year-old, three-story downtown building has the local claim to fame of being home to Fairfield’s first elevator.

For that matter, the building is the first three-story structure constructed in the city.

Coyle owns the Solano County Title Co. building at 740 Texas St. It was built in 1930 and still retains the “Title Co.” inscription across its front, even though that particular business is no longer there.

That old, small elevator built by Atlas Elevator of San Francisco is still working. But sometimes, users call for help when they reach their floor and the door doesn’t open. They don’t realize the elevator has a manual door.

“It’s very basic,” Coyle said.

The Title Co. building is among those described in the new historical downtown guide produced by the Fairfield Main Street Association. The association hands out the guide at the Thursday farmers market to encourage visitors to venture beyond the confines of that event.

“And what better place to walk than downtown?” said Margaret Manzo, executive director of the Fairfield Main Street Association.

The guide in large part conjures up the Fairfield of the early 20th century. The coming of the state highway down Texas Street and the rise of automobile culture reshaped a then-small town of a few thousand people, with downtown seeing a 1920s growth boom.

### **‘Striking piece of architecture’**

Coyle bought the Solano County Title Co. building in 2008 and has his law offices there, along with several other tenants, including Koong Jyun Korean Barbecue on the first floor.

On the second floor is a narrow hallway with offices. The doors have transoms, frosted glass windows and gold mail slots. Coyle can imagine opening a door and seeing Sam Spade, the detective from the film noir classic “The Maltese Falcon,” sitting inside, feet up on his desk. That’s the atmosphere.

“When I remodeled the building, I tried to retain the flavor as much as possible,” Coyle said.

E.L. Dearborn was a driving force behind the construction of the Solano Title Co. building.

Solano Title Co. was formed in 1900 and Dearborn began working for it in 1907, having moved from San Mateo County to accept a position. In 1917, he bought out one of the founding owners and became the company’s general manager.

Dearborn by 1930 had decided to build what at the time qualified as Fairfield’s grandest office building for his title company.

Apparently, the new building was breathtaking. At least, the Solano Republican wrote some breathless prose about it after the scaffolding got removed July 30, 1930, unveiling the facade for all to see.

According to the paper, “citizens gasped in wonder and admiration, for they beheld one of the most unique and striking pieces of architecture imaginable.”

The new building made such a splash that the Solano Republican on Aug. 28, 1930, ran a two-page advertisement welcoming it to the downtown.

Besides the title company, the building contained the Fairfield Post Office. This marked a big step up for an agency that had its first home in the mid-1850s in what the Republican described as a “little shack” near the site of today’s courthouse.

### **Solano County Bank**

Another building featured in the Main Street Association historic guide is 800 Texas St., originally home to the Solano County Bank and today home to Touch of India.

Touch of India sells colorful Indian panjabi suits. It offers eyebrow threading as a way to remove unwanted hair.

All of this takes place in a room with sunlight coming in from an enormous bank of windows along the eastern wall. The high ceiling has wooden beams. Much of the building is dominated by a single room.

Surjit Johal of Touch of India on a recent day looked at the room and said the designer must have been a person with imagination, a dreamer.

Franck McGinnis is the man behind this building. A Vallejo native, he graduated from the University of California in 1907, became a Fairfield attorney and built himself a huge home in Suisun Valley.

In 1928, he won permission from the state to establish a Fairfield bank. He bought a lot at the corner of Webster and Texas streets and the bank building went up – at a cost of \$40,000 – within a matter of months.

The Solano Republican, never one to hold back praise, in its Sept, 27, 1928, edition said that “the new Fairfield bank will be as handsome and imposing as any in California in that class.”

An advertisement prior to the Jan. 5, 1929, grand opening said the bank was “ready to advise and aid all worthy enterprises, to be at once the anchor and the sail to the ship of enterprise and commercialism in a great community.”

To succeed, the bank had to convince customers their money would be safe there. To that end, it boasted having a vault built with 18 inches of reinforced concrete and a four-ton door with 4 inches of steel.

Today, the vault is used for storage, but not money, Johal said with a laugh. It remains with the door open.

## **Fairfield arch**

A striking downtown feature mentioned in the guide is the Fairfield arch that spans Texas Street and proclaims the city as Solano County’s seat.

The arch cost \$1,700 to create and manufacture in 1925. The Lions Club spearheaded the effort and when dedication evening came, hundreds of people came to the downtown.

District Attorney B.W. Dobbins started telling the crowd about the history of downtown, then paused. Meanwhile, J.H. Schulze climbed a ladder, threw a switch and the lights to the arch snapped on. A band started playing.

“It was a dramatic moment befitting the importance of the occasion and the crowd applauded before Mr. Dobbins continued his address,” the Oct. 29, 1925, Solano Republican reported.

Then residents of all ages – children to seniors – danced in the street to the band far into the night.

Almost 90 years later, it's a rare sight indeed to see a crowd dancing in the middle of downtown Texas Street. But the Main Street Association history guide just might get a few more people out walking the sidewalks.

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