

Cornelius “Con” Shea: From Cattle Baron to Land Baron



Cornelius “Con” Shea started life on June 28, 1840 in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. His parents immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1825 as part of the "Potato Famine" Irish immigration.

It was in 1857 that Mr. Shea arrived in California and may be counted among its pioneers. Cornelius had left Canada, sailing around Cape Horn and settled in the San Francisco. He worked as a blacksmith in Saratoga and later left for the gold mining fields in Idaho arriving in the spring of 1864. He worked as a miner and then teamster for a while, but by 1867 had established himself as a cattleman. That year, a well-off rancher bankrolled him to go to Texas and bring back a herd of longhorns. He made at least two, if not more, trips to Collin County, Texas to herd longhorns to the Oregon and Idaho mining fields each trip taking approximately 6 months. He and a brother also ran a meat market in a mining camp that flourished from 1871 to about 1876. After the Oregon Short Line laid tracks across Idaho, Shea began selling cattle to the Eastern markets.

In 1870 Cornelius Shea married Miss Ettie McCantyre. Marietta E. McIntyre Shea began life in Texas and traveled by wagon train and foot from Collin County, Texas to the Idaho Territory. Her entire family joined Cornelius Shea and a Mr. Miller in a five month journey to a new life. Her parents, Joseph and Martha McIntyre, left in the spring of 1869 with seven children in tow. Marietta, or Etta, as the family and friends called her, discovered love along the trail. She fell in love with Cornelius some 14 years her senior. Ettie and Con Shea’s marriage lasted until his death 56 years later.

Shea purchased a winter home in Santa Rosa, California. After that, he “commuted” to Idaho and Oregon to oversee his ranch and business properties. He left his name on Idaho’s Con Shea Basin and on Sheaville, Oregon.

Eventually, he served as the vice president of the new Savings Bank located on the corner of Fourth and Exchange in Santa Rosa and was director in several other local corporations. He was also a life member of the Benevolent Protective Order of Elks and had for years taken an active interest in the affairs of that fraternal organization.



In 1891, Con Shea and family have moved into their elegant new home on 526 Mendocino Avenue. (This house was later saved from demolition by W.C. “Bob” Trowbridge when he purchased it for one dollar and moved it to its present location at 625 B Street in the 1950’s.)

Around 1897, Shea disposed of his Idaho and Oregon ranch holdings and moved permanently to Santa Rosa. He invested in land and other real estate eventually becoming one of Santa Rosa’s larger property holders, owning several business blocks, among them the former Elks Building at the corner of Fourth and B Streets. At one point it was determined he was “the heaviest individual taxpayer in Sonoma County”. During the disastrous earthquake that befell the city in 1906, he sustained heavy losses when several of his houses went down in the common destruction, but he was not discouraged and was an important and helpful factor in the reconstruction of the city. He continued to actively engage as a building contractor until his retirement a few years later.

Con Shea died on May 20, 1926. Con, was one of the largest property holders of his day in Santa Rosa considered a millionaire when he passed. He left behind a vast empire of real estate and other business ventures.

While he accomplished a lot and was well-respected in the community, looking at some of Con Shea’s history through today’s PC lens a few of his activities would have been questionable:

Bannock Indian War of 1878

During his time in Idaho, Con and two of his brothers took part in the Battle of South Mountain during the Bannock Indian War of 1878. Causes of the war were rooted in many factors. The immediate spark was the rooting of hogs on the prairie. Indians objected strenuously to the running of pigs by settlers on the fields where Indians had for years dug the camas plant as a staple of their diet. The Bannock War was an armed conflict between the U.S. military and Bannock and Paiute warriors in Southern Idaho and Northern Nevada, lasting from June to August 1878. The Bannock-Paiute totaled about 500 warriors; they were led by Chief Buffalo Horn who was killed in action in June of 1878. The U.S. military, consisting of the 21st Infantry Regiment and volunteers, was led by Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard. Nearby states also sent militias to the region. The conflict ended in September 1878, when the remaining scattered Bannock-Paiute forces surrendered; many returned to Fort Hall Reservation. The US Army forced some 543 Paiute, from Nevada and Oregon, and Bannock prisoners to be interned at Yakama Indian Reservation in southeastern Washington Territory. Considering the fact that the Indian people of Idaho were forced to give up their lands and were crowded onto reservations on which many of them found it impossible to work out a satisfactory way of life, a resort to force was not surprising. These campaigns terrorized the whites and ruined the Indian peoples who were involved, but "solved" the Indian problem for most whites. For the Indians, the wars meant simply that they had no alternative but to exist on reservations permitted them by the white intruders.

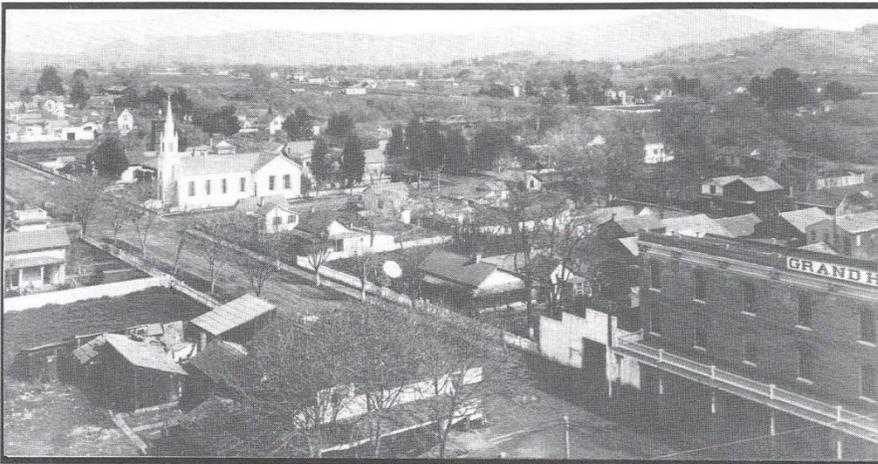
Anti-Chinese Committee

The anti-Chinese meeting Friday night, instructed its chairman, Hon. S.I. Allen, to appoint a committee of fifteen to draft an agreement not to patronize the Chinese. The chairman has appointed the following gentlemen as such committee: J.F. Kinslow, R. ross, Ellis Morrow, J. Mathews, J.F. Smith, P. Towey, Con Shea, M. Vanderhoof, J.W. Ragsdale, J.F. Linthicum, D. Sheward, C. Bane, Lawson Ross, Steve Storey and Jacob Harris.

(Daily Democrat – Jan. 31, 1886)

Red Light District Landlord

In Sonoma County, Santa Rosa had its share of brothels in an area called the Tenderloin. The story of the Santa Rosa’s red-light district has its beginnings in the “Gay ‘90s”. It was located just south of Chinatown. At the turn of the century (1900) there were five or more whore houses. Many were owned by local capitalist and developer Con Shea. *Blue Lights and Red Faces* by John Schubert (Sonoma Historian article– 1990)



The sporting houses of downtown Santa Rosa were clustered within a block of each other, as shown in the Sanborn Fire Insurance map (circa 1900) reproduced below. The key at the bottom has been added to identify the properties. Some of these same buildings are visible in the upper right portion of the photo above. The Methodist Episcopal church at the upper left stood on the southeast corner of D and Third Streets. Third continues west past the Grand Hotel at the lower right. The picture was taken from the top of the old courthouse in 1895. Photo from the Don Silverek collection

