

Charles McCarthy: Recalling Fulton's glory days

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Valley Voices

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The new focus on Fresno's once-busy downtown Fulton Street with vehicle traffic, crowded trolleys and, later, nightly lines of young drivers "dragging the main" stirs vivid memories for those old enough to remember bright lights, crime-free sidewalks and prospering businesses.

Emerging from the downtown Kinema Theater one June evening after seeing a first-run 1930s film "Thunder in the City" a young pre-schooler found wet streets, bumper-to-bumper vehicles and lines of trolley cars. It was business as usual despite an afternoon thunderstorm setting a Fresno daily rainfall record that stood into the early 1990s.

Fulton Street's business prosperity didn't survive until the 1990s. But new renewal talk rumbles like thunder. The old streetcars and overhead trolley wires are gone forever. But the majestic buildings remain and there's plenty of floor space inside.

Praising the business "success" of pedestrian malls in other cities, out-of-town advisors convinced Fresno leaders more than a half-century ago that removal of Fulton Street vehicle traffic would produce a future retail promised land. Critics tried to point out, to no avail, that many of these successful malls were indoors in cold-weather cities.

The result, Fulton Street's mall pavement was installed. Traffic vanished. After initial success, cash registers didn't ring so often. Downtown business moved to those newfangled shopping centers. The "old" downtown became a lonely relic.

The old shopper-friendly trolleys had already left Fulton Street in the late 1930s. Trolley rails were jackhammered out of the Fulton Street pavement and reportedly sold as scrap to Japanese ammunition factories preparing for World War II. But even with exhaust-belching city buses rattling past, downtown stores remained busy.

Business anchors along Fulton Street included law and medical offices. Banking was done at large downtown branch offices. From downtown dentists' chairs, patients could look out the window at traffic on the street below and see steady streams of folks going into and leaving variety stores like Kress or clothing outlets like Roos Brothers or Cooper's.

Still, the June 1938 rainfall record outlasted street cars, buses and Fresno's downtown prosperity. With city buses rattling along Fulton Street, military families from Fresno's Hammer Field and two other Army bases shopped along downtown Fulton Street during the 1940s.

When Fresno factory whistles and automobile horns on the afternoon of Aug. 15, 1945, signaled the end of World War II, along Fulton Street scenes of jubilation erupted. Men in uniforms and civilian clothes hugged and kissed any female in sight. Fulton Street in both directions was jammed with traffic.

After wartime rationing ended, a healthy boom prevailed along Fulton Street. Movie theaters retained their crowds, especially at new Hollywood releases premiered in fast-growing Fresno. But by then, scattered shopping centers were offering easier vehicle parking for a variety of attractions including movie theaters.

Fulton Street remained crowded, attracting Fresno's newly licensed teenage drivers ... and some without licenses. These teens' "colors" weren't gang influenced. Rather they were school colors from Roosevelt, Edison, Fresno High, San Joaquin Memorial and later, the new Bullard High School. It became an after-football and weekend ritual for teens to traverse Blackstone Avenue from Ratcliffe Stadium southward to the "main."

Gasoline sold for less than 18 cents per gallon.

Service stations near downtown did a brisk business. Fresno police quickly broke up any fistfights. Teens wanting to avoid traffic tickets were careful not to run any red lights or challenge anyone to a hot-rod race — not downtown anyway.

Drive-in restaurants prospered near the "main" with long lines of vehicles and their occupants wanting to see and be seen. Stan's Drive In on Broadway one block west of Fulton Street sponsored a late-night "Private Line" on Radio KMJ.

Cold War military secrecy reportedly quelled one anonymous Private Line dedication request from the North Pole where Air Force crews patrolling just south of Siberia found that the low-frequency broadcasts from downtown Fresno could be clearly heard on aircraft radio-compass frequencies.

"It'll never be the same again," a Fresno 70-something woman said recently about dragging the main. "Kids today just aren't the same."

But others contend that downtown Fresno with its historic but mostly vacant buildings remains a business gem awaiting a surge of new customers.

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