

Early Vallejo thirsted for fresh water

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Have you run your water faucet today and enjoyed a drink of fresh, clean tap water?

Early Solano County residents had to make do with backyard wells with hard and brackish water. Outhouses nearby often contaminated the water source.

Other homes owned cisterns to collect winter rainfalls. By late summer, algae, mosquitoes and other life forms made this water very unhealthy. In addition, dry winters led to water shortages during the hot summer months. Water could also be purchased from water purveyors, who sold their liquid in barrels for high prices.

Vallejo's citizens were among the earliest in the county to attempt to secure a steady water supply for their town. A high saline concentration in many of their wells made fresh-tasting water a luxurious commodity.

In the late 1860s, Vallejo's population numbered 6,500. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad, these numbers were bound to increase. As a city (since April 6, 1868), the need for a steady water supply was immediate.

One of the early sources targeted were the Sulphur Springs. The Vallejo Reporter raised hopes on April 13, 1867, that, "after 24 hours of exposure to air, the water is freed of its sulfurous taste and becomes far more palatable than the well water of Vallejo. Parties are looking into the question of conducting surplus water from the springs in pipes to supply the town. There is sufficient water to supply all those who are likely to patronize. We may have water conducted to our own doors this summer!"

Six water companies vied to bring water into town for the first time, giving an idea of the profitability they saw in the water business. Most of the companies, however, existed only on paper, lacking both capital and the necessary engineering expertise to carry out plans.

One of the more promising companies was the Vallejo Water Company. Incorporated in 1867, the company offered \$25,000 worth of stock at \$10 a share in 1869. It was granted a franchise and began construction on a reservoir at Capitol Hill.

During that same year, a rival company arose, the Vallejo City Water Company. Led by

contractor and builder Joseph Collins Edgcumbe, Mr. Wright and Mr. McCue, this company teamed up with widely known water company developer Anthony Chabot. He had previously developed the San Jose Water Company and had built the large Lake Chabot reservoir in the Oakland hills.

Sometime in 1868 "Anthony Chabot dropped quietly into town," and soon began shipping pipe into Vallejo.

The Vallejo City Water Company petitioned the city of Vallejo on August 24, 1868, for "leave to lay down water pipes and to erect hydrants and reservoirs within the city limits for the purpose of supplying the city with pure water from the Sulphur Spring Creeks." The company was granted a 20-year franchise, promising the city to furnish "water for the extinguishment of fires gratuitously."

Surveying the area, Chabot found a site three miles north of the city. Where Blue Rock Springs Creek entered a canyon, near today's Columbus Parkway and Six Flags Marine World, he decided to build an impounding reservoir. Its waters, sitting on an elevation, would flow down to the city with the necessary pressure.

An earlier promise to supply Vallejo with water within a 12-month period created huge pressure on the company. Edgcumbe and Chabot needed to purchase 425 acres in the canyon area where they began to build a dam. Pipelines had to be installed down Vallejo's main streets. Chabot actually established a pipe manufacturing company to turn out 1,000 feet of pipe every week.

The project was swallowing large sums of money, but did not attract large numbers of investors. Sometimes Chabot hand-carried bags of silver when he came over from San Francisco, to inspect the work and to pay his employees.

By the end of 1870, the reservoir began to fill up, creating a large, curved lake, which Chabot stocked with perch, giving local residents a new destination to spend a sunny afternoon fishing.

Finally, on Dec. 5, the first water reached the city. After numerous tests and necessary checks for leaks in the pipes, residents were able to turn on their taps. In addition, 35 hydrants had been installed to help with the ever-present danger of fire.

Not everybody was happy, with many complaining that the prices were too high and the delivery service prone to interruptions. In addition, the company still was short on capital.

A major problem occurred in 1874 when the pipes suddenly started leaking throughout

the whole system. Geysers spurted out from the main line, puddles formed in the streets, rivulets of mud ran down the hills and streets of Vallejo. While Chabot had used pipes built according to the latest standards, chemical conditions in the Vallejo water had caused the riveted sheet-iron to rust through and to leak.

It took only a few weeks for the entire reservoir to drain through those leaks. For the rest of the long, hot summer, Vallejo residents had to revert back to their cisterns and backyard wells. Barges brought water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and water carts once again sold water by the bucket or barrel.

Anthony Chabot replaced his sheet-iron pipes with cast-iron pipes and the system once again brought water into town. But Vallejo citizens did not forget this dry summer and their dependence on a private water company. Eventually, they worked together under the leadership of local stationer John Frey to develop a municipally-owned water system.

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