

Julia destroyed the Vallejo waterfront

By Jerry Bowen

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The early days of steam-powered ships in the Sacramento Delta and Bay Area proved to be both exciting and disastrous.

Prospectors, empire builders, gunmen, tin horns, trollops, merchants, bankers and hobos all clambered aboard steamboats to reach their destinations. Some of the ships were floating palaces; others were floating junk piles. Between, were the ordinary people movers that usually gained little notice ... unless disaster struck.

Built in 1864, for the California Steam Navigation Company for use on the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, the Julia was one of those "in-between" people movers. She began life as a coal burner. Coal was the most common fuel of that day, but an incident two years later would change that.

On the evening of Sept. 30, 1866, the Julia's destination was upriver, but she was still in San Francisco Bay, having steamed only as far as Alcatraz Island, when the chief engineer informed the ship's captain that there was something wrong with one of the boilers. The captain quickly decided to turn back. As the Julia did so, the steam drum blew out, killing five people and scalding or injuring 11 others. Several of the injured later died.

After the explosion, the Central Pacific Railroad purchased the Julia for the South Vallejo-to-Vallejo Junction run. In addition to the needed repairs, the ferry was converted to burn oil in her furnaces instead of coal. Julia was the first ship on San Francisco Bay to burn oil. She was followed in conversion to oil by the Oakland (formerly the Chrysopolis) and the Solano train ferry, during regular overhauls.

Southern Pacific Railroad became the owners of the Julia in 1885 during the takeover of Central Pacific.

During a regular inspection on June 8, 1887, the Julia was certified that it was in good condition, a fact that would figure heavily in a future investigation.

Fog was particularly heavy in Vallejo the morning of Feb 27, 1888, but that was no reason to suspend operations. There were some 70 people on board the Julia early that morning as she approached the dock in South Vallejo at about 6:15 a.m.

Without warning, people ashore were stunned and those nearby were blown down as a horrific explosion shattered the early-morning quiet. It was so foggy that at first they couldn't even tell where the blast had come from.

A soft orange glow appeared in the mist in the direction of the waterfront and grew in intensity as flames consumed the Julia and the entire dock area.

The Julia had blown up in a giant ball of flame.

Rescue parties sprang into action, only to find they couldn't get near what was left of the ship because the entire waterfront was ablaze. Terrified passengers who had not been blown into the water or killed outright scrambled into the water or anywhere else in attempts to escape the voracious flames.

A boat and crew from the British ship Aldergrove that was docked at the Starr Mills, quickly set out toward the flames and succeeded in rescuing nine passengers from the water in addition to recovering several bodies.

Firefighters from North Vallejo joined sailors from Mare Island Navy Yard to help, only to find there were no hydrants and that the tide was out, eliminating any chance of pumping water from the bay. They had to wait several hours before enough water came in to permit dropping suction lines into the bay. By that time, 600 feet of the wharf had been consumed in the blaze.

Newspaper reporters were quick to blame the fuel oil as the cause, reporting, "instead of burning coal or wood, as any honest steamboat would do, she was flying in the face of Providence and taking the bread out of honest stokers' mouths by using oil."

In all, 30 people died in the disaster and 28 were injured.

A Coroner's Jury assembled in the Frisbie House in South Vallejo on Feb. 28 to determine the cause of the explosion.

The investigation showed that oil did contribute to the fires, but the cause of the explosion had more serious implications.

Previous testimony was disputed when Chief Low (USN) testified. He stated, "The explosion occurred in my opinion by the first giving away on the starboard side of the starboard boiler near the tube sheet. At this point an initial break took place, which like the tearing of a rotten garment extended from end to end of the round shell. This threw the starboard boiler against the port boiler and the port boiler broke by impact. The cause of the explosion was simple. The boilers were originally too weak and there was

mismanagement in the fire room preceding the explosion.”

Chief Low also pointed out that the ordinary temperature of coal is 1,500 degrees and that oil can go as high as 4,000 degrees, thereby overheating and weakening the wrought-iron boilers.

P.F. Dundeen, a boiler manufacturer from San Francisco, testified that a certificate was produced showing the thickness of the boiler iron was 3/8 of an inch. Chief Low told the jury, “I did not notice any part of the shell proper that was 3/8 of an inch thick.”

The jury agreed that the metal could not withstand the high temperatures and noted the certification of the thickness of the boilers was false.

But in their final comment they said, “We further believe that petroleum is a dangerous compound when used as liquid fuel and we believe that its use should be prohibited by law on all steam passenger or ferry boats.”

After the jury’s findings were published, the Oakland and Solano were converted back to coal burners. Equipment for oil burners was relatively primitive and those in charge of operating boilers were not properly trained. It was not until after 1900 that development of steel and better technology made it possible to return to oil for fuel.

The Amador, which had already been scheduled to replace the Julia, assumed those operations. Her captain was George Gedge, the same man who had been the master of the Julia when she blew up. It is said that he never did recover from the shock of his experience on the Julia, but he went on to remain with the Amador until he died at age 72 in 1891.

The events of 1888 had been all but forgotten, when in the 1960s, the keel of a ship was raised from the muddy waters during dredging operations in the Mare Island Channel. Investigations led local historians to believe it was the last remains of the Julia.

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