

## Chipping away at island's name

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, September 21, 2003

Have you ever wondered how a certain location on a map came to be named? Maybe not. But more often than not, a fascinating story unravels when researching the origin of the name of an island, town, road, or canyon. Such was the case of a little-known island at the southern extreme of Solano County.

Chipps Island, located southwest of Collinsville, was named after a rather remarkable man, Pilsbury Hodgkins. So where did "Chipps" come from if the gentleman's name was Pilsbury Hodgkins?

Hodgkins, at age 24, was infected with "Gold Fever" while working in Boston, Mass., as a shipwright. As did so many others, he made the decision to head for the gold fields of California to seek his fortune.

Along with four of his friends, he boarded the sailing ship York that was bound for California in 1849. Hodgkins hired on as a ship's carpenter and soon earned the nickname "Chips."

After arriving at San Francisco, the five friends sailed on to Stockton in a small boat where they hired a team of oxen and a cart and made their way to Tuolumne County.

Although he did fairly well as a miner, he also worked part time as a mounted messenger for several express companies in the Southern Mines, delivering mail and gold to San Francisco.

Evidently he developed a reputation as a very reliable man, and in 1853, the Todd Express Company convinced him to leave the mines to work full time for them at their Stockton office. Five months later, Wells Fargo & Co., purchased Todd's and retained Hodgkins as an employee.

Often working 20-hour days, Chips, as everyone called him, became one of Wells Fargo's most valuable employees. Due to his competitive nature, deliveries were often faster and more reliable than those of rival companies.

In 1857, Wells Fargo transferred him to messenger duty on the San Joaquin riverboats. It was at this time that he began to keep a journal of his riverboat trips, including an accurate account of the amount of gold he carried.

Because of its importance as a transportation hub and financial center, San Francisco became the natural destination for the treasures sent from the California gold fields. In addition, the city was home to the only United States government mint on the Pacific Coast.

On his very first trip from Stockton to San Francisco on May 15, 1857, Chips was responsible for the transport of \$23,111.50 in gold dust and \$4,717.50 in gold coins, a very tidy sum in those days. By the end of his first 12 months, he had been entrusted with almost 4.5 million in gold. His largest single consignment occurred on July 18, 1859, in the amount of \$115,400, which included \$35,100 in gold coins, and \$80,300 in dust, plus approximately 400 pounds of gold, the equivalent of more than 2 million in today's market.

His grueling work schedule on the San Joaquin River was interrupted for a short time when at the end of July 1858, he recorded in his journal: "Chips was married." Another messenger, Richard M. Hall, substituted for him on two riverboat trips so that he could get married. At the San Francisco home of friend and businessman Joseph S. Bacon, "Pilsbury (Chips) Hodgkins united with Miss Louisa G. Shattuck who forsook her home in the East, family, and friends of childhood, and came across the stormy seas" to unite with him. The Alta California newspaper wished them "a life of unalloyed happiness."

In Stockton, the newspaper announced that "correct, attentive, and reliable" Chips and wife would be "a welcome addition" to the city.

So how did the Island I spoke of earlier acquire its name from Chips Hodgkins? The first of his three sons was born in 1859. With new family responsibilities, Chips needed to supplement his income beyond his Wells Fargo salary for a while. From 1857 to 1860 he made an arrangement with San Francisco bookseller E.J. Muggridge to distribute periodicals and books in Stockton on a commission basis.

Around 1860 (possibly earlier) Chips acquired the title to a marshy island in Suisun Bay, the very one known today as Chipps Island. No, I didn't misspell the name, Chipps vs. Chips. Early maps show the island was designated as Chips Island, but somewhere along the way a mapmaker misspelled the name, so that today it is known as Chipps Island. The 993-acre island lies north of Antioch and falls within the boundaries of Solano County between Suisun City and Collinsville.

On June 8, 1860, Chips, accompanied by George Loftus, rowed to the island, arriving after dark. On the next day Loftus was hired to dig drainage ditches to drain the marshes while Chips returned to messenger duties.

With the rich soil available after draining the marshy areas, Chips brought in a herd of

cattle. He checked on the island from time to time during his messenger runs and noted this entry in his journal: "Found things better than expected."

As the years passed, injuries and bouts of illness began to take its toll on his job performance. Unable to work for two months in 1867, more health problems resulted in missing 45 messenger runs from September 1868 to March 1869. A number of Wells Fargo messengers substituted for him when he was unable to perform his duties. On March 26, 1869, messenger Samuel M. Hilton wrote in Chips' trip book, "May he have better luck in the future. I hope I may never have to go in his place again under the same circumstances."

Finally, he had to give up the rigorous messenger job. He accepted a new position in the Collection Department in San Francisco. One day after being assigned to his new duties, Chips wrote in his journal that he had tried his new tasks and "stood it well."

With the new job location, he moved his family from Stockton to San Francisco and gradually his health returned. Chips resumed his messenger duties in 1870, carrying Wells Fargo express to and from Southern California.

With all the added travel, he was unable to monitor his cattle venture, so he sold his island in February 1872 to A.A. Rose of Oakland for \$1,000 in gold.

In 1877, he left the steamship life and worked at the San Francisco office until December 1891, when illness overtook him. Confined to his home, Chips died in September of 1892 at the age of 67.

Shortly before his death, he seemed to dwell upon his early experiences. According to the Daily Republican on Sept. 7, 1892, his last words were: "The Express has gone wrong."

In accordance with his wishes, Wells Fargo shipped his remains by steamer to Stockton, to his final resting place. At the final services, Wells Fargo placed a treasure box filled with dried flowers on the site, a symbolic act of respect and esteem for the faithful messenger.

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