

Memories of the Fairfield area

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, January 04, 2004

Memoirs often provide valuable insight about the past that may seem of little importance when an individual first writes them. Today, with the last remains of the old company town of Cement rapidly disappearing under the onslaught of new development, a way of life is also being relegated to the dusty archives of history to be remembered only in the minds of a few old-timers and people who enjoy learning about the past.

The Maglio family moved to the company town of Cement in the fall of 1911 and then into the small community of Vanden in 1913. Laurence Maglio described the general area in a fair amount of detail in his memoirs. At that time, Fairfield was still very small even though it began its life when Capt. Waterman laid it out in 1856. It wasn't until 1903 that it was incorporated as a town, but it still had not grown much in comparison to Suisun City.

“Armijo High School was on the corner of Union Avenue and Texas Street. It was built in 1917. There was an older high school in the back. It was still there when I started Armijo in 1919. The school authorities used it to play basketball. At the end of Union Avenue next to the S.P. railroad tracks there was a California Packing shed - also another packing shed called Gugenheimers. On the Suisun side of the tracks there was a cannery. They canned tomatoes, asparagus, pears and peaches. The railroad spotted quite a few cars of peaches there after I went to work for S.P. in 1928. The courthouse and jail and high school were the east end of Fairfield, and Madison Street was the west end of Fairfield of town as far as businesses were concerned. The rest was open fields on the east end of town, and orchards on the west and north. The south was Suisun and the slough.”

Laurence lived in Vanden from 1913 until he married in 1935. He attended the old Center School with about 30 other children from first to eighth grades taught by the lone teacher, a Miss Lynch. He went on to Armijo High School and graduated in 1919.

The Oakland-Antioch Electric Railroad operated a line until the 1930s when Sacramento Northern Railroad took over. It ran from Sacramento through Dixon, Rio Vista Junction and finally to Chipp's Island near Collinsville where the Ramon Ferry carried trains to Mallard Island at Antioch. Laurence's brother, Mario Melvin Maglio, was a deckhand on the ferry and his brother-in-law, Dick Albertson, served as a mate. Dick's uncle was captain of the boat. The railroad was discontinued in 1942.

Laurence described operations at the Pacific Portland Cement Company and its own railroad system:

“The Pacific Portland Cement Co. had three railroads; a two-foot gauge, a three-foot and a standard gauge. The two-foot was known as the Quarry Railroad, the three-foot was known as the CQ; Cement and Quarry. They were electric. The standard gauge was steam and known as the CT&T (Cement, Tolenas and Tidewater RR). It had a half-passenger and half-express cars and three locomotives. The two-spot was a saddleback 0-4-0, no tank. The spot was a saddleback 0-6-0, no tank. The four spot was an 0-6-0, but it also had a water tank behind.

“The four spot ran between Cement and Tolenas. The two-spot was a spare. The two-spot ran between the disintegrator and the clay pit. The clay pit had a steam shovel that loaded down onto a gondola car, and the 2-spot hauled it to the disintegrator. The steam shovel was an old one. It had an engineer, Bill O’Connor, who passed away in 1965 - age 85, boom operator, Harry Thiessen, who is also gone, and a fireman Lee Gray who passed away in 1962 at age 70. The engineer on the 2-spot was Jimmy Bales, who passed away in 1979 - he was 77 years old. The engineer on the 4-spot was Dave Calderwood and Elmer Blossom was the fireman. R.D. Wilson was the conductor, while Bud Weirick and I were the brakemen. Incidentally, the 2-spot had no fireman.

“That railroad hauled manufactured cement to the S.P. at Tolenas in boxcars, and then hauled rock that had come from Auburn by S.P. back to Cement. It was then dumped on a high trestle that had a tunnel underneath where the C.Q. electric went and loaded the little cars and hauled it to the dryers. Here’s what the CQ looked like:

“Manufacturing cement was quite a complicated procedure. The rock and clay was dumped in big silos. It was mixed and then went into the dryer, then the upper ball mills where they were mixed and ground to a fine powder. Then it went through the upper tube mills and got well mixed. Then through the kilns that heated it up until it was red hot and came out in round cinders. Then it went out in big piles to be cured. After about a year of curing, it was back to the lower ball mills and ground up to a fine powder. It was then mixed in the lower tube mills - then it was cement. When it came out of the lower tube mills it was pretty hot. The cement went by conveyor to the Bates Bagger. One man operated it and it kept him busy loading cement sacks. The sacks were loaded upside down. There was a nozzle on the bagger that filled the cement sack. When there was 96 lbs. in it, it would shut off and the sacks went by conveyor to box cars to be loaded. They had about 300 employees, including schoolteachers, office men, storekeeper, hotel workers, quarry men, railroaders and mill hands.”

“After the cement plant shut down in 1928 there wasn’t much work except the ranches

and SP railroad at Suisun.”

During his working career with Southern Pacific Railroad he was witness to the then biggest railroad ferries in the world, now all but forgotten.

“The way the SP railroad trains were transported across the river. SP had two ferries - the Solano and the Contra Costa. They sailed between Benicia and Port Costa. The SP completed the bridge across the river in 1929 - then no more ferries. Highway No. 68 to Martinez was then Highway No. 21. It went through Cordelia to Benicia, and then you’d get on a ferryboat to Martinez. Highway 12 from Fairfield to Lodi was a narrow road that went right by what is now Travis Airbase, through Denverton by Rio Vista Junction, then Rio Vista to the bridge. When you got on the bridge you had to go onto an island, then on another bridge to get off the island. The name of the island was Wood Island. They dredged it out somewhere in the 1930’s. The road to Antioch from Rio Vista was rough. You had to take two ferries to get to Antioch. No bridges. The first time I went over that road was in 1922 in a Maxwell touring car.”

This concludes my series on the memoirs of Laurence Maglio. During a telephone conversation I learned from his niece, Tammy Albertsen-Murray, that his wife still lives in the area and shares the same sense of humor that Laurence had. I’d like to thank Tammy for contacting me about her uncle and adding information about this interesting man.

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