

# Disaster strikes the Sophie McLane at Suisun

By Jerry Bowen

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Californians always have done things in a big way, but doing things in a big way does not always mean using good sense along with it.

In the spring of 1850, the river steamer New World astounded Californians with a run from San Francisco to Sacramento in five hours and 35 minutes.

Not to be outdone by another, every boat became a potential competitor. All too often, when any two met, a race was on with no holds barred. It was winner take all.

On Aug. 18, 1850, the Fawn pushed its luck with too much steam pressure and blew up, injuring many. The Sagimore blew apart near the Stockton pier on Oct. 29, killing 50 people. On Jan. 23, 1851, the steamer Major Tompkins blasted itself into eternity, and the New World, trying to outdo her old record, popped a steam line in Steamboat Slough. Result: seven more dead.

The engineer of the R.K. Page tossed a cask of oil into an overheated boiler in a contest with the challenging steamer Governor Dana. The increased steam pressure resulted in an explosion that blew the insides out of the Page, killing three passengers.

The side-wheeler Jenny Lind, on the San Francisco to Alviso Creek route, lost 31 lives. In the same year, with total disregard for safety, the river steamers American Eagle, Stockton, Ranger and Helen Hensley all suffered major explosions with heavy loss of life. Defective materials also were a frequent cause for disaster, causing boilers to explode without any hint of warning.

One can't help but wonder if prominent Vacaville merchant Jacob Blum might not have had some of this on his mind on the morning of Oct. 26, 1864, as the crew of the Sophie McLane (aka Sophie McLean) made repairs to her boilers at the Suisun docks.

Ah, but why worry? The captain was a sensible man and not prone to taking chances. The ship was fairly new. It was built in San Francisco in 1858, and was presumed to be in good shape. That was one of the reasons he shipped most of his goods from San Francisco via Suisun to his store in Vacaville with the California Steam Navigation Co. Blum had been invited as a guest of Capt. Henry P. Hulbert on this run to San Francisco by the company as a way of thanking him for his business.

The ship began experiencing a series of problems after leaving the company's wharf in Benicia. A bolt blew out of a boiler, causing the steamer to dock at Benicia's Government Wharf to repair damages.

Because it would take some time to fix the boiler, the engineer ordered his assistant to fire up under one boiler alone. She continued the rest of the way to Suisun on one boiler, arriving about half-past seven in the morning. The passengers expressed some uneasiness during the trip, commenting that at times the ship acted as if it were out of control due to the lack of power and poorly operating machinery.

After landing, the engineers and one of the firemen completed necessary repairs overnight and filled the boilers with water.

That fateful morning at 7:39, everything seemed normal and shipshape. After making a quick check of the boilers, first engineer George Dingle was at breakfast with pilot George Folger. The second engineer and one of the firemen were in the boiler room preparing to get the ship under way. Ship's porter William N. Lawlor was sweeping off the upper deck. The McLane's captain, Henry P. Hulbert, and Jacob Blum were on their way to breakfast in the ship's mess. Charles Nelson, the watchman, was still in his berth. Fireman Mathew Nugent was asleep forward, and George Kagee, a saloon-keeper from Fairfield, was on board.

It began as just another ordinary day.

At 7:40 a.m., without any hint of warning, the ship's boilers suddenly exploded with tremendous fury. Shattered timbers, huge chunks of metal, scalding steam and bodies were blown skyward, blasting away the morning quiet and instantly killing Folger, John McClellan and Nelson.

Second engineer Gage was among the twisted wreckage, dying from massive injuries and inhalation of scalding steam. Hulbert and Lawlor were blown into the water and soon died of their injuries. Frank Staples was thrown onto the gangplank, landing in a sitting position with serious injuries.

Some of the crew were missing and later found dead.

By some miracle, Blum lay stunned amid the wreckage with a severely injured leg and major bruises about the head and face, but would survive the disaster. He returned to Vacaville, recovered from his injuries and lived 14 more years.

In all, there were 10 dead and 12 injured. It was the worst disaster Suisun ever had experienced.

A coroner's inquest was convened at 10 the same morning to identify the bodies of Folger, Gage and Lawlor.

The Solano Press detailed the events that followed the explosion and identified the rest of the dead and injured. Several panels of local citizens were impanelled to determine the cause of death of the rest of the crew and passengers killed in the explosion.

On Nov. 5, 1864, a coroner's inquest was reassembled to take the testimony of chief engineer George Dingle to determine the cause of the blast.

The coroner's jury found a verdict, "implicating no person, but stating that they believed the iron the boilers were made of, were of an inferior quality and unsuitable for the purpose."

History later proved this to be an accurate verdict. Many of the old steamboats suffered the same consequences of defective metal. No company ever was held responsible or prosecuted, even though it was proven many times the faulty iron contributed to many deaths during the steamboat era.

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