

# Discovery of gold powered steamboat river travel

By Jerry Bowen

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- Editor: This is the second installment of a feature about the Sacramento River. In my last column I discussed some of the early exploration of the Sacramento River and ended with the first steamboat that made regular runs from San Francisco to Sutter's Fort.

With somewhat irregular travel established up and down the river, it wasn't until a major event that Sacramento River traffic would make a dramatic increase.

With the discovery of a few flakes of gold in the millrace of Sutter's Mill at Coloma by John Marshall on January 24, 1848 (some of us still believe January 19 as did the old pioneers, the whole world would soon beat a path to the gold country. One of the major places of embarkation to the gold country was to be Sutter's Fort. Of course with so many people rushing into the area via the Sacramento River, Sutter's Fort could not hope to meet the needs of the gold seekers. Usually they arrived with nothing but dreams and enthusiasm. With this sudden and incredible demand for goods and services, Sutter needed other facilities.

Using the Indians under his control, he built a roadway between his fort and the Sacramento River and named the landing "Embarcadero," intending it to be simply a temporary landing even though it was subject to flooding. It was his intention to found a more permanent town on higher ground with a good anchorage for ships south of the Embarcadero and name it Suttersville.

The constant arrival of ships, passengers, and goods soon turned the port into the fledgling town of Sacramento with the help of Sutter's son, John Sutter Jr. and Sam Brannan who had other plans for the Embarcadero.

With the competition between Suttersville and the Embarcadero for control of the trade, Sutter Jr. and Brannan began offering merchants free lots if they would move to the Embarcadero, and sold lots at very low prices.

In a desperate move to counter their competition, the merchants of Suttersville offered to undersell anyone in the area. Then the merchants at Sutter's Fort proceeded to buy all of their stock, leaving them nothing to sell to the Argonauts of 1849. The final blow came when Bidwell, McKinstry and Hastings, who were the promoters of Suttersville, quarreled, and any efforts to continue building Suttersville failed.

With thousands of gold seekers descending on California, more and more merchants and shippers were attracted to meet the need and initially made enormous profits. Many of the ships crews jumped ship and headed for the gold fields. The abandoned vessels were turned into stores, warehouses, and hotels until there was a line of 24 ships tied, two deep, to the riverbank at the Embarcadero by July 1, 1849. One of the abandoned ships, the La Grange, served as Sacramento's jail from 1850 until it sank in 1859. After sinking it was sold and salvaged of all its copper and timbers by the Chinese.

After what was usually a four-month voyage via Cape Horn , all goods were unloaded in San Francisco. From there they moved upriver to Sacramento and other river towns that served as the centers of both settlement and trade. During this era, steamboats soon began replacing the slower sailing ships. Of course, the new steamboats were much larger and more powerful than the Sitka, the first one to make the trip.

Domination of steamboating on the Sacramento was achieved by the California Steam Navigation Company soon after its incorporation in 1854. The company held a virtual monopoly by price-cutting, gaining control of wharfs and piers and general harassment. Opposition boats and companies either went bankrupt or agreed to a common set of rates.

Of course with so much traffic going up and down the Sacramento River, other communities were bound to spring up along its lower reaches below Sacramento.

After the sale of government lands and final decisions by the Lands Commission on the validity of Mexican land grants, expansion of agriculture began soaring along the Sacramento in 1855. Orchards, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, grain fields, and vegetables flourished and were sent to Sacramento and San Francisco from many landings and ports along the Sacramento River. The crops were brought to Sacramento by steamer but more often by sloops and schooners that sailed the river, stopping at 1anding after landing to bring the produce to urban markets. The profits made by those farmers who supplied the "Forty-niners" were often spectacular.

Small steamboat companies were started up to meet the needs of farmers. One of the most important companies was the California Transportation Company that formed in 1875. Its large fleet of small steamers stopped at all farmers' landings to pick up freight - a far cry from the big river steamboats that only stopped at Sacramento, Rio Vista and Benicia.

These steamboats stopped at all landings between Rio Vista and Clarksburg. Believe it or not, there were as many as 65 different landings to be made on a single trip. The lower Sacramento had as many as 200 landings although no map lists all of them

because of the different kinds of landings. Some of the landings were substantial structures with pilings and heavy timbers while many were nothing more than piles of stacked up brush made by a single farmer. The only hints of some of the landings are shown in illustrations in Thompson and West's books and maps of Sacramento, Solano and other counties that bordered the Sacramento River.

Towns would come and go for various reasons. Stephen Massey, a salesman for a land speculator during those days described the creation of a pseudo-town: "Thus towns were conceived in the minds of speculators, some were stillborn while others had a brief and rapidly terminated life. Onisbo, laid out at the mouth of Steamboat Slough in 1849 with an unsuccessful expectation of being the head of deep-water navigation rather than Sacramento lost its post office to Courtland and vanished by 1867. Emmaton, below Rio Vista, vanished in the flood of 1876."

Brazos del Rio, surveyed in 1857, underwent a quick name change to Brazoria. The building of a wharf and the establishment of a post office gave the young community prestige and encouraged further growth as it supplied the local farming and salmon fishing industry and provided a means for shipping their products. Brazoria was renamed Rio Vista in 1860. After recovering from the disastrous flood of 1862 the town was moved to higher ground where the present city of Rio Vista is today.

Freeport's founding in 1863 was an attempt to avoid or evade taxes by the Sacramento Valley Railroad that opened Feb. 22, 1856, and ran from Sacramento to Folsom.

In 1862, the city of Sacramento demanded payment for back taxes and the maintenance of the streets over which the railroad passed.

In 1863, the railroad built a 10 mile line from Brighton south to the Sacramento River thus freeing the railroad from city taxes and charges. In 1865 it was taken over by the Central Pacific Railroad at a cost of \$800,000. With the tearing up of the Freeport-Brighton line, Freeport was soon reduced to a mere ferry point on the Sacramento River.

During the period 1853-1878, navigation, trade, agriculture and life in general along the lower Sacramento were altered by a new man-made problem - the debris from hydraulic mining. The floods of 1861-62 and the great floods of 1875 and 1878 brought down the entire mass of accumulated debris - destroying fishing, permanently ruining agricultural lands, wrecking water supplies, and raising the bed of the river. This caused the river to flood more easily, constantly breach the levees and flood the Delta Islands.

Even after hydraulic mining was declared illegal in 1884, debris was still washing out of

the mining areas, and it was not until the 20th century that the rivers began to scour themselves of accumulated debris.

Eventually the railroads, then automobiles, reduced the need to use the river for transportation of goods, people and services. Indeed it is still in use for such things (and recreation).

In my article about the Harbison House I said the tree above the Nut Tree Stand was an oak rather than a black walnut tree. Many thanks to Ed Power for pointing it out.

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