

Helping to make their communities better

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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At the beginning of the 20th century, women all over the country founded women's service clubs to improve their communities. In upper Solano County, the three most prominent clubs were the Dixon Women's Improvement Club, Vacaville's Saturday Club, and Suisun/Fairfield's Wednesday Club.

All the existing clubs were united under the Solano County Federation. In February 1923, the federation held its annual convention at the headquarters of the Wednesday Club. Several hundred women from throughout the county met and enjoyed an interesting meeting. Miss Anna Kyle, speaking for the history and landmarks department of the federation, reported on the plans to conduct a Solano County Historical Pageant under the auspices of the county clubs, to be held in the second week of May. The event was to take place on the grounds of the Benicia Arsenal, with reference to Benicia as the first state capital.

Messages from the various chambers of commerce endorsed the history pageant project. Newspapers throughout the Bay Area also showed an interest in the event.

Miss Kyle asked the club women for the donation of any relics of old California, promising that all would be returned to their rightful owners. She also reported on the work that had already been conducted with the schools "throughout the county where historical data has been secured by pupils for the various episodes," reported the Solano Republican on Feb. 9, 1923. "Hundreds of school children will depict the various episodes while prominent club women will carry the more important parts. Each club will be given an episode to depict. The pageant will be given by floats with characters costumed in accordance with the Spanish, Indian and early American episodes.

"Especially fine work has been done in securing data, designing costumes, and generally outlining plans for the project at Armijo High School, where students are particularly enthusiastic."

Miss Jean Davis of the Armijo High School Department had already compiled the text for the pageant, as well as a list of committees that needed to be established, proving herself "a genius in the art of playwriting, and her work of writing episodes for this pageant will eclipse any of her past work." Once finished, the text, which covered every town and city in the county, would soon be mailed to all the clubs, so that the members

could begin preparing their parts in the pageant.

The Solano Republican added on Feb. 18: "The schools have been asked to work on Spanish and Indian costumes and also to gather stories of pioneer days. They have also been asked to make drawings of floats so as to get ideas for a float parade

"Dr. Douglas Wright, of Berkeley, cousin of Miss Anna Kyle, is writing the music of the pageant.

"The local Wednesday Club is back of the affair and have given up their May Fete scheme in favor of the pageant."

By the following week, the Solano Republican could announce under the center front page headline, "Romance of California's Early Days of Gold Will Live Again in Allegory" that the final location for the pageant had been picked. Art and literature instructor Miss Jean Davis, rural music supervisor Miss Anna Kyle and Solano County Free Library head librarian Clara Dills, who had been appointed to develop the pageant, traveled to Benicia and, after much inspection, settled on "the great natural amphitheater at the United States Arsenal grounds as most suitable and having the greatest historic significance."

"The great amphitheater will conveniently accommodate 10,000 people," reported the Solano Republican on Feb. 28. "Back of the spectators will be the great walls of the old arsenal building with rows of cannon surrounding it, and before them, looking over the spacious stage and the hundreds of actors, will be the expanse of upper San Francisco Bay with Mt. Diablo and the greater interior in the distance."

"Here the boats coming and going will carry one's mind away from the hundreds of actors and schoolchildren in the pageant, to the day when the Argonauts made their way to the interior finally building a greater country than the land of gold."

The Benicia Chamber of Commerce prepared for the vast numbers of visitors expected, at least 10,000, both from within the county as well as from all over the state.

These visitors would come "to see again the romance of Conception de Arguella in "The Empire that Might Have Been," to see the development of the Padres, the Vigilantes, the Gold Rush, the military and finally down to the building of Western America."

The commandant of the arsenal offered all possible assistance "and the moral success of the military guarantees success."

The organization grew by leaps and bounds and included a number of positions which each club needed to fill for their part: pageant master, business manager, pageant artists, costumes, musical director, scenic manager and a director of episodes. The whole event was expected to last three hours, with 20 minutes allocated to each episode.

The Wednesday Club centered its episode on Suisun, "which is Indian in character and full of action. The music for the Tule Dance is especially beautiful and the dance figure most artistic as arranged by Mrs. Bailey. The cunning little costume drawn by Miss Doddson is simple, but altogether charming," reported the Solano Republican on March 21.

On March 28, a lengthy update appeared on the front page of the Solano Republican. Representatives of all the clubs met in Benicia to coordinate the multitude of details that needed to be done to create the pageant. By now, the committee had settled on the date of May 11, a scant six weeks away. The Solano Republican once again lauded the three women, Miss Davis, Miss Kyle and Miss Dills, for having taken on this massive project. "Miss Davis has been working on the episodes for six months and really carries the burden of the success to the pageant," the reporter wrote. "She has proven herself a genius in this work and when all details are completed, the county will have attained something rarely ever attempted by any county in the country, and its historical and educational value can scarcely be overestimated."

The Benicia meeting also was meant to familiarize the citizens of the town with the project. "It was evident that a great many knew little about the proposed pageant or what was expected of them, showing that a campaign of publicity is necessary in order to acquaint everyone with the plans. Benicia is preparing to cooperate in the fullest sense, and already Col. E.P. O'Hearn of the Benicia Arsenal is having the grounds put in condition, the grass and weeds cut and the rubbish removed."

Speakers from the different cities reported on their progress. Mrs. Morgan Jones of Vallejo, head of the welfare department of the "Vallejo Womans Clubs" (sic), assured her audience that Vallejo would be the heart and soul of the pageant. She also pointed out that there were over 2 million women affiliated with women's clubs in the country, and that the Solano County Pageant idea could be introduced to all of them as a model to replicate.

The Solano Republican lauded the fact that everybody was donating their time and talents to the project, saying "In fact, everyone interested has been working without compensation, and will continue in the work until the pageant is assured. There has been a wonderful spirit of cooperation manifested by everyone, and a great deal more will be accomplished when it becomes generally known what is expected of each

individual.”

I will finish the story of Solano County’s Pageant in my next column.

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