

Pageant showed panorama of early Solano

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The spring of 1923 saw all of Solano County's women's clubs feverishly preparing for the event of the year - a historic pageant in Benicia to be held May 11, re-enacting the history of early California through a scripted play, scenes depicting specific events, colorful costumes and specially written music.

Suisun City's Wednesday Club had taken the lead. The three key organizers, County Librarian Clara Dills, Rural Music Supervisor Anna Kyle and Art and Literature instructor Jean Davis, all were members of the Wednesday Club and became instrumental in the success of the pageant.

By March, the Benicia arsenal had been selected as the staging place. Preparations were under way to accommodate an expected 10,000 or so visitors. At a meeting on March 28, 1923, the different subcommittees reported on their activities. The mayors of all the cities served on the general committee while having to attend all subcommittee meetings. They also helped with publicity and served as general advisers.

Miss Jean Davis was the author of the play and episode director, selecting the cast, directing the rehearsals, ensuring "that members of each group are prompt in attendance (and quiet and orderly) ... " She also acted as the stage manager, so that "each individual in his group is properly costumed, has necessary properties and is prepared to make entrance at proper time."

Miss Emma Doddson of Suisun acted as the artistic director. William Pierce of Suisun was in charge of the general arrangements for the stage and in managing the stage work force.

Musical director Dr. Douglas Wright composed the music for the play, selected and rehearsed the musicians.

E. C. Stove of Fairfield handled Advertising and Publicity, a major job with many components. She "prepares and collects newspaper articles using: a) names of prominent persons both taking part in and attending the pageant; b) names and biographies of pioneers; c) romantic stories of early days; d) descriptions of historical costumes; furniture and relics of all kinds."

Miss Stove also prepared suitable posters, arranged interesting book displays, pictures,

dressess, etc. and had them rotate throughout the towns; contracted "formal advertisement to attract strangers;" organized lectures in churches, lodges and other clubs. She solicited free advertising and prepared "Attractive advertisements to appeal to all 'types' or 'angles.' "

Placards were placed along the State Highway announcing free parking space for the pageant. C. E. Mayfield of Suisun oversaw the transportation committee, negotiating with stagecoach and railroad companies, as well as individual owners of historic vehicles, trying to get the cast to all the rehearsals throughout the county and to the pageant stage on the day of the event. There were also a dance director, a business manager, the float organizer Clinton Inas of Benicia, and the secretary, Mrs. D. H. White of Fairfield, who took care of the clerical work for all committees.

Any volunteer who has ever prepared an event can only be impressed by the scope and attention to detail this particular endeavor brought forth. Everything seemed to run smoothly and on time, when disaster struck. On Friday, May 4, an old barn in the pageant's proposed area burned down. Government officials immediately denied further access to the site, putting the whole pageant in peril. A hurried meeting was called for Tuesday, May 8, at the Solano County Courthouse in Fairfield. Twenty-five of the organizers were present.

The Solano Republican recapped the meeting on the next day and explained the reason for the denial: "Government inspectors stated that because the grass is dry now and because of the quantity of explosives stored in the various ordnance buildings near the scene of the pageant grounds, it would be best not to hold the event in the Arsenal grounds, and it was so ordered."

Over the decades, several severe explosions and fires had occurred at the Arsenal, especially in the Powder Magazine located close by the proposed area. The inspectors' concern was justified and accepted by the committee members.

Nonetheless, so close to the pageant, nobody wanted to just give up on the spectacle. "At yesterday's meeting the sentiment was unanimous for continuing the work," said the Republican, "and a committee, with William Pierce as chairman, was directed to find a suitable site near Benicia, and to make final preparations for the big event. Several sites were taken under advisement but at this time is not definitely known which will be used, but one with a side hill or grove of trees as a background will be preferable."

And amazingly, they pulled it off, although the date for the pageant had to be moved from May 11 to May 19. The new site was situated but a half-mile from Benicia's main street (presumably First Street), with a fringe of Eucalyptus trees as a backdrop.

The Board of Supervisors immediately issued a proclamation with the new date, urging that all businesses be closed for the pageant.

"All stores of Suisun-Fairfield will close for the day Saturday," proclaimed the Solano Republican on May 16, "including Rummelsburg's. This decision was reached after individual conferences with the various merchants, who, desiring to attend the pageant, agree to close till six o'clock and make their deliveries after that hour, instead of in the morning as usual."

Right next to this announcement, the Solano Republican trumpeted in bold letters: "Everything Ready for the Biggest Show of the Year in Northern California." This was followed by a detailed description of every scene, and the lead players.

The Suisun contingent played Episode I: "Out of the mist of the past the Memories return to Solano county," wrote the Solano Republican. "The dance of the Tules and the Blackbirds; Chief Malaca and his Suisunne (sic) Indians; the white traders, and the legend of a romance between a beautiful maid and a handsome white trader. The white trader leaves his love, who laments him. Her Indian lover, realizing the hopelessness of the maiden's love, has pity on her and shoots her; while the Indian men and women of the tribe join in the dirge as the body of the dead girl is carried on a litter to the Indian burial ground across the hill.

"The Indian lover, realizing what he has done, commits himself to the Great Spirit. As if in answer to his prayer, the Spirit of the Elements, in the form of the west wind, dances across the stage."

David A. Weir, editor of the Solano Republican, played the Indian Brave (Lover of Wihunahe), while Wihunahe, the Indian Maiden, was portrayed by Martha Piotrowski.

Vacaville was assigned Episode V: "Vacaville in its earliest days was peculiarly Spanish, being the town of the Bacas and the Penas. It became a harbor of refuge to many a prairie schooner, and the covered wagons are shown approaching the town while the episode generally will show incidents of its earlier history.

"Slowly approaching on the hills is a prairie schooner bringing to this land of fruit the first of the Pleasants family. An attack on a prairie schooner by a band of Indians is a feature. After many difficulties the pioneers reach the town." Miss Nita Lyons, a descendant of two Vacaville families, danced a Spanish dance with costumes brought by her families from Spain.

Vallejo got to re-enact the Mission period, with Chief Solano proclaiming himself a Christian, followed by General Vallejo and his soldiers. Benicia portrayed hospitality at

the Old Solano House. Rio Vista got to re-enact the flooding of its first settlement and relocating to its new home, with the Solano and Sacramento County Supervisors appearing on stage to push together the bridge across the river. Dixon showed its relocation as a result of the coming of the Central Pacific Railroad. Fairfield, as the County seat, pointed toward the future, showing the work of justice, the Free Library, and "a graphic glimpse of the World War period when the American Legion men marched by."

"Pageant A Great Success," the Solano Republican concluded on May 23. "It was, according to common belief, the greatest event of the kind ever attempted in the county, and too much credit cannot be given those who planned and executed the charming educational tableaux. ...

"Through a period of over five hours a panoramic array of nine allegorical episodes representing the transformation of the county from a rugged wilderness into one of the garden spots of California held in wrapped (sic) interest the thousands who had come from all points of the compass to witness the spectacle."

With more than 1,500 participants and thousands of spectators, one final thing remained to be organized. The Boy Scouts of Solano County did some real Scout service by policing the grounds and afterwards, "The boys were assembled and thrown out in a skirmish line and in a half-hour picked up every piece of paper and bits of rubbish remaining on the field." It was a memorable, grand fete. My final wish is that some photographs of it will now surface in the community.

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