

Bridges replace ferries for Bay Area transport

By Nancy Dingler

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As early as 1798, in George Vancouver's book, "A Voyage of Discovery," the great inland waterways around Yerba Buena (San Francisco) were described.

Crossing Carquinez strait (discovered by Jose de Canizares, longboat pilot to Juan Bautista De Ayala in 1775) was dangerous and harrowing with strong tides that could sweep the unwary to sea. The reed boats, fashioned by the natives, seemed light and flimsy, yet were quite watertight, allowing the Patwins to navigate from one side of the strait to the other.

It was this conveyance that was utilized by Lt. Gabriel Moraga of the Spanish Army, in 1810, when he was sent with 17 horse-mounted and heavily armed soldiers across the strait to find and punish hostile Indians that were raiding the missions. In his report, Moraga outlined how he and his men used the reed boats to transport their arms and supplies, while swimming their horses across.

Crossing the great water barrier of Carquinez strait was accomplished in this manner for many years. Going around the hazardous crossing meant days of delay which was only possible during the summer months, for the area was mostly seasonal marshes.

Gen. Mariano Vallejo, who had acquired vast grants of land, encouraged settlers to come to Northern California. One group of 420 settlers arrived in 1845. Among them was a Dr. Robert Semple. Semple was an energetic entrepreneur who saw a need for a better and safer way to cross, and began operating a ferry service.

The towns of Benicia (named for Vallejo's wife) and Vallejo began to grow and prosper. In 1842, William Wolfskill arrived with his family, which included his brothers. They established the Rancho de los Putos and began farming the Fairfield area. With arrival of A.A. Ritchie and Robert Waterman in 1850, the selling and development of real estate began in earnest.

Capt. Josiah Wing arrived in 1852. Wing bought wharf rights and part of the "island" at the head of Suisun Slough. Josiah sent for his family in Brewster, Mass., moved a house from San Francisco, that he had built, then put up a wharf and warehouse. By the end of the year, the captain had founded the city of Suisun. Reaching the Bay Area, particularly San Francisco, became much easier.

Locals in the Suisun Valley (Cordelia, Green Valley and Fairfield) could take a cargo schooner. Still, the only practical way to get across Carquinez strait was by boat or ferry.

In 1868, a railroad company, the California Pacific, laid track from Sacramento to Vallejo. To take advantage of the increased commerce and traffic, a year later they established a ferry service between Vallejo and San Francisco, a more direct route, then the Benicia to Crockett ferry that Semple had established approximately 20 years before.

Unfortunately, the company overextended itself financially and the ferry ceased operation by 1883.

In the meantime, in 1876 the Central Pacific bought out the California Pacific route from Sacramento to Vallejo. They too were interested in a shorter route to the Bay Area. At the time of the purchase, the rail line was from Sacramento to Oakland by way of Stockton, through Niles Canyon and over Altamont Pass.

By 1878, the Central Pacific, after great expense, managed to build a track from Suisun to Benicia on marshland that swallowed tons of Sierra granite before a track could be stabilized. While the company struggled with trying to cross the marshes, in their Oakland Point shipyard, a train ferry was being constructed.

It would be the largest train ferry boat in the world - the Solano. The Solano was a steam powered side-wheeler. The side wheels were operated by separate walking beams which were powered by 2,500 horsepower engines.

Her deck was outfitted with four parallel railroad tracks. The Solano would be capable of transporting two complete passenger trains or one freight train, including road engines and switch engines. The ferry would cross between Benicia and Port Costa, a distance of approximately 3 miles.

The route was so popular and time saving, that in 1914, the Southern Pacific, which had taken over Central Pacific in 1885, directed the construction of a sister ship. The Contra Costa exceeded the size of the Solano. At their peak, the Solano and Contra Costa carried 98,262 passenger cars and 48,130 freight cars.

By 1917, Aven J. Hanford, grocery store magnate, was growing increasingly frustrated with the difficulty in bringing produce and other goods from Central Valley farms to his Bay Area stores. Along with partner, Oscar H. Klatt, they formed the Vallejo-Rodeo Ferry Co.

As successful as the ferry operation was, it had always been a dream to build a bridge. In 1922 Hanford and Klatt formed the American Toll Bridge Co. With federal construction permits in hand, the actual construction began in 1923.

The great cantilever bridge was described at the time as a “majestic masterpiece of engineering.” When completed in 1927, the impressive new structure was heralded as the world’s largest highway bridge.

Its total length was 4,482 feet and the main support towers stood 325 feet above the treacherous waters of the Carquinez strait. The official dedication of the bridge on May 21, 1927, was one of the greatest public celebrations in Solano County’s history.

Automobile traffic approaching the Vallejo end of the bridge was backed up for miles, causing spectators to abandon their cars and make their way on foot to the ceremony. The governors of four states - California, Oregon, Washington and Nevada - were on hand for the dedication.

Southern Pacific wanted a bridge, as well. On May 31, 1928, the company authorized the expenditure of \$12 million for a bridge to abut from Suisun Point north of Martinez on the south shore to Army Point, Benicia on the north shore. Train No. 30, a Sacramento local, had the honor of being the first passenger train to cross the Martinez-Benicia bridge on the morning of Oct. 15, 1930.

The Carquinez strait barrier to the Bay Area had been conquered completely. The construction of the bridges spelled the end of the ferry business. The Solano and Contra Costa were left to rot, being too large and unwieldy to be used elsewhere.

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