

Solano has seen many changes

By Nancy Dingler

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The 1850s brought a major change to Suisun and the surrounding area that would alter the landscape forever.

Ship captain, Josiah Wing purchased the "island" of Suisun from Curtis Wilson and Dr. John Baker in 1852, built a wharf and a warehouse, then had his house in San Francisco shipped up the slough and his family sent for. In partnership with John Owens, Captain Wing laid out the town of Suisun. They soon discovered that at low tide, Suisun was not an island, but connected to Fairfield by a strip of land, eventually named Union Ave.

The wharf and warehouse business grew quickly. Wing had the area raised out of the muck of the surrounding marsh so that farmers that were settling in the Suisun Valley could bring their agricultural goods by wagon to the waiting cargo ships. Soon, other merchants moved to the area, drawn by the expansion of business.

Suisun became a bustling port of commerce where fortunes were made. At the time, there was a wheat boom. There was a huge demand in Europe for flour.

Entrepreneurs moved to Suisun to set up mills with stone grinding wheels to meet the demand. These mills would have run round the clock - 24/7, if it wasn't for the fact that the steam boilers that ran the grinding stones had to be cleaned out periodically.

Suisun became an industrial and transportation hub.

People flocked to the new city to make their fortunes and to construct magnificent, palatial homes. The streets were filled with horse drawn freight wagons and stage coaches to feed the appetite of the shipping industry. Goods and passengers flowed through the port of Suisun.

Then in 1868, the first train of the California Pacific Railroad established a stop at Suisun, via Jamison Canyon from Vallejo. The five car excursion train was met by excited citizens and a brass band.

The next year, the transcontinental rail was completed at Promotory Point, Utah. Suddenly Suisun and Fairfield were connected to New York City. Going to see the trains became a fashionable pastime for nearly 30 years.

The coming of the steam train spelled the end of the ship business. As the years came and went, more and more cargo was carried by the railroad.

While all this sweeping change was taking place in the Suisun Valley, across the country there was a massive migration to California. Many of the forty-niners headed to the California goldfields out of the ports of New York, Philadelphia and Boston. In 1847, the United States contracted with the U.S. Steamship Co. to carry the mail to California.

The steamship company established a new route through the Isthmus of Panama. A railroad across the Isthmus was established in 1855, shaving off time from the 30 days it was taking. It was still taking too long to get news and mail.

Promoters in the cities of Kansas City, Memphis, St. Joseph, Omaha and Fort Smith lobbied for the creation of a national road to California. Seventy-five thousand Californians signed a petition in 1856 demanding that Congress establish an overland mail route. After Congress appropriated an annual subsidy for mail service from Mississippi River to San Francisco, the leading express firms in the East formed the Overland Mail. John Butterfield and William G. Fargo were experienced express operators and were awarded the mail contract. The goal was to deliver mail from the East to California in 25 days, along with passengers.

Alexander Majors, William H. Russell and W.B. Waddell, having established a very profitable freight business with a government contract to supply the military garrisons in the Southwest, embarked on a risky venture to bring mail from the East Coast to California in 10 days via pony express. They had hoped to win a federal mail contract. The pony express for all of its excitement and romanticism only lasted two years. Speed continued to be the driving force for all of these entrepreneurs.

In competition with the Butterfield and Fargo overland stage operation was Ben Holladay, who briefly reigned as the "Stagecoach King" of the West. It was reported in the 1860s that Holladay employed 15,000 men on his stage and freight lines and owned 20,000 wagons and 150,000 draft animals. Holladay recognized that in long-distance transportation, the days of animal power were numbered. Animals were fleeing before steam. This new source of power drove draft animals into more and more remote sections of the West. In 1861 the Pacific Railroad Act was passed, which spelled the end of the overland stagecoach business.

However, it did not spell the end of the local stagecoach businesses, one of those "remote sections of the West" was the Solano County area. Milt Cutler ran stage lines successfully for many years until the advent and introduction of the automobile.

A Suisun editorial lamented; "Milt Cutler, one of the old pioneers of Suisun, but latterly

of Napa, has been in town during the week, shaking hands with many old friends. He is remembered by all citizens as one of the most agreeable and accommodating stage managers we ever had. He had at one time three stage lines centering into Suisun, one from Monticello, one from Vacaville and from Benicia - all doing a rushing business. And those were prosperous times, too, before the great octopus laid its rails and absorbed all our young blood and vitality. With Suisun a central shipping point for all the produce for miles and miles around and the town filled to overflowing with wagons, teams, businessmen, farmers and lot of business to do, those were lively times indeed. And what has the railroad done to repay us for this loss of trade and prosperity? Ah, but times have changed, and to talk against the railroads is to be challenged as an old foggy. But there are many old citizens of Suisun who would like to return to those good old days and have Milt Cutler reestablish his stage lines. . .”

Now, as then, change is inevitable. People are still seeking the fastest way to get from point A to point B. Who knows what the next 50-100 years will bring.

As the fast ships were replaced by faster stage lines, that were replaced by steam trains, that were replaced by automobile and airplanes, one can only speculate what will replace them and what change the new speedier means of transportation might bring about.

SPECIAL NOTE: It has come to my attention that there is a proposal to move the old library, which is at the center of a drive to place a museum within. Moving the building, I fear, would irreparably damage a wonderful piece of historical heritage and Fairfield would, once again, find itself without a connection to it's illustrious past. Too many of the historical buildings have already been destroyed, let's hope the old library is not another victim.

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