Mare Island shipyard celebrates 150th birthday

By Nancy Dingler

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This past week, Mare Island celebrated its 150th anniversary. The shipyard facility closed in March 1996. According to Sue Lemmon and Ernie Wichels, in their book, "Sidewheelers to Nuclear Power," Mare Island was established in 1854, and was the oldest naval installation in the Pacific.

It has been designated as a National Historic Landmark District, the highest designation bestowed by the National Park Service on a historic resource. There are only 1,300 such sites in the nation. Today, the island is being transformed for civilian use. The first European to step foot on Mare Island was Don Perez Ayala, a Spanish explorer who called the island Isla de la Plana (Island of the fruitful, level ground).

The name changed in 1835 when a ferry transporting men and livestock between land on either side of the Carquinez Strait was caught in a small squall which caused several of the animals to panic, kicking the crude ferry apart. Some of the animals swam to shore. Most drowned. One prized white mare belonging to Gen. Mariano Vallejo, Mexican commandant for Northern California, was found several days later. Vallejo renamed the low segment of land Isla de la Yegua (Island of the Mare).

The 1849 Gold Rush put California history into high gear. Within a year, the republic of California became a state. Congress moved to have a naval yard established on the West Coast to protect the Pacific Squadron.

On Sept. 16, 1854, Admiral David Farragut, his family, a civil engineer, clerk and their families arrived in Vallejo.
With a single floating drydock and a few blacksmiths, wood caulkers, sailmakers and shipwrights, Mare Island was born. Soon it was a busy repair base. The first ships to visit for repairs and provisions were the Massachusetts, John Hancock, St. Mary's, Savannah, Fenimore Cooper and the Vincennes.

In September 1855, the Independence, one of the first ships of the line to have three gun decks, arrived and was part of the landscape for the next 57 years. She was built for service against the English during the War of 1812, but wasn't completed in time to see any action. She took part in the war with Tripoli, against the Barbary Coast pirates and also served in the Gulf of Mexico during the Mexican War. In 1846 she sailed to the Pacific around Cape Horn.

Under sail she was an impressive sight. After her 1857 conversion to a station ship for Mare Island, she resembled Noah's Ark. Instead of Noah and all the critters, the Independence held Marines, a brig for prisoners and the medics operating the yard dispensary.

In 1814, the ship was sold and on Nov. 28, 1814, she was towed away to lower San Francisco Bay while a bugler in Vallejo mournfully noted her departure by playing "Auld Lang Syne." The Independence was burned for the copper in her hull. Her figurehead is still displayed in Alden Park. During its 142 years, the men and women of the Mare Island Shipyard built hundreds of ships and other craft and overhauled thousands more. Mare Island produced every imaginable item from sails to turbines, wooden gigs to battleships, ships' bells to wardroom furniture.

Its processes have been far-reaching in the fields of artificial rubber and in the development of noncorrosive and anti-fouling paints. In the production of propellers, the yard has had few equals. Mare Island manufactured many propellers weighing up to 13 tons each, established the pitch, balanced them and also developed the centrifugal propeller casting technique.

An oddity, the monitor Monadnock, was built privately in 1879 in the city of Vallejo. The iron-hulled, twin-screw, double-turreted monitor was constructed by the Vanderbilts under the company name of Continental Iron Works. The shipyard was located at the foot of Santa Clara Street; it later became the Aden Shipyard.

By the time it was ready to launch Sept. 19, 1883, the company was bankrupt. As soon as the ship hit the water, the Navy commandeered it and towed it to Mare Island. It took four years for Congress to authorize some $3 million for her completion. She was finally commissioned at Mare Island on Feb. 20, 1896.

The coal re-fueling ship Jupiter was launched at Mare Island Aug. 24, 1912, and was the largest naval vessel ever built on the West Coast. She was the sister ship of the ill-fated Cyclops, which disappeared in March 1918 without a trace in the "Bermuda Triangle."

Later, the Jupiter would be converted into the Navy's first aircraft carrier and renamed the Langley. Dozens of destroyers and scores of escort and amphibious crafter, submarine tenders, tankers and submarines were launched. Mare Island also built the battleship California and the heavy cruisers San Francisco and Chicago, all of which fought against the Japanese in World War II in the Pacific.

Within three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, an Army balloon company arrived from Massachusetts to fill the sky over Mare Island and

Vallejo with their big tethered gas bags.

The balloons were spaced between the Suisun Marsh on the east and San Pablo Bay on the west, north to Highway 37 and south to the Maritime Academy. Their heights, their risings and retractions, and the alternating spaces between them were planned to confuse any enemy air raiders and prevent them from determining a pattern.

Pilots questioned the usefulness of the balloons, saying when low fog completely hid the island, the balloons were still on top, marking its exact location. At least two of the balloons got away; one landed and exploded on Vallejo's El Camino Real, and another landed in Federal Terrace and blew up several houses. Mare Island entered the atomic age in 1954 by beginning to build nearly a score of nuclear-powered submarines, thus completing the evolution of propulsive power from canvas to coal to oil to the atom.

This is the yard where people never forgot that "Navy yards do not build ships; ships do not fight battles; it is people who build ships, people who fight battles." Congratulations to all who worked at Mare Island.