

## **A historic tableau on Pepper Belly's wall**

**By Nancy Dingle**

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The new mural on the west wall of the Pepper Belly's Comedy and Variety Theater on Texas Street in Fairfield depicts an array of historical images.

Hopefully among them will be a drawing of American Indian Chief Solano, after which the county is named.

The mural may not contain the chief's image because of debate on how he should look.

A statue of Chief Solano stands just a few blocks away in front of Fairfield's old library. That building will hopefully begin a new life as a museum. The dream of a historical museum, in the heart of Solano County, seems to have awakened a renewed interest in local history.

Of course, Chief Solano might not even be a footnote in California history if Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo had not written about his friend.

Vallejo sealed Solano's legacy forever by insisting, as a state legislator, that the county be named for the 6-foot, 7-inch Suisun Indian leader.

Vallejo was one of those larger-than-life figures who shape history. Mariano was unique in another aspect - he was California-born and raised. His father was a soldier for the king of Spain, and had an unquenchable love of adventure and wanderlust.

He joined Father Junipero Serra's expedition into California to establish missions and convert the natives. Mariano's father settled in Monterey, married and started a family.

A Spanish galleon is depicted in the mural. In 1775, Juan Bautista de Ayala, a Spanish explorer, along with his longboat pilot, Jose de Canizares, discovered the sheltered harbor of the Southampton Bay in Benicia.

Piloting the San Carlos, Canizares sailed up Carquinez Straight where he discovered the area we now call Suisun. Then in 1768, Father Junipero Serra left Mexico on a land expedition led by Jose de Galvez.

Serra established his first mission in San Diego a year later. It took just seven short

years for the string of missions along California's coastline to reach the area around San Francisco then called Yerba Buena.

The last mission to be established was Mission San Francisco in Sonoma, which brings us back to Vallejo. When Vallejo was in his 20s, he was assigned to command the presidio at San Francisco. Shortly thereafter, Spanish rule was overthrown in 1821.

Secularization of the missions began in 1833. Vallejo was ordered by the new Mexican government to go to Sonoma to establish a presidio, ostensibly to protect Mexico's interests against Russian incursion. By 1834, Vallejo was granted Rancho Petaluma and absorbed all the lands and goods of the mission.

Francisco Solano Sem Yeto had been taken in a bloody and tragic raid on his home village, Yulyul, (near Rockville) when he was 10 or 11 years old in 1817. He was brought up in the mission at Yerba Buena and in later years transferred to the mission at Sonoma.

Solano was a "mission Indian" and had been given wide latitude by the friars, as well as their trust. He opposed the secularization of the missions.

Vallejo represented the enemy. According to Vallejo, there was a major battle in which the American Indians outnumbered the Mexican army. However, they more than made up for the disparity in numbers by sheer firepower.

Seeing that things were not going well for his followers, Solano sued for peace, a move Vallejo welcomed. They formed an alliance.

Solano would have his enemies wiped out with the help of the Mexican army and in turn Vallejo would secure the area against hostiles and open the territory to European and American settlers.

Enter American sea captains Archibald A. Ritchie and Robert H. Waterman. These men had made fortunes in the China trade.

Ritchie purchased Rancho Suisun from Vallejo in 1850. A few days later, he sold one-third interest to Capt. Waterman. Waterman laid out the town of Fairfield and donated six square blocks toward a civic center, providing the county seat was moved from Benicia to Fairfield.

Competing with Fairfield was Suisun City, established by Josiah Wing. Suisun City became the major shipping point for the ranchers and farmers that were flocking to the area. Eventually one disastrous fire after another would drive people away from Suisun

City into Fairfield.

A large settlement of German immigrants made their home in the Suisun Valley and established large tracts of wheat, fruit and grape orchards. Entrepreneurs built flour mills. The most famous and largest was the Dingley Mill in Green Valley.

Before long these mills were steam-driven. Agricultural goods were shipped by boat out of Suisun City, and then later, went by train.

Farm workers were needed. The Japanese came to fill this niche, followed by Filipinos and by World War II, Mexican laborers arrived as depicted by the Diego Rivera-style figure.

The Chinese arrived in California seeking gold in 1848. When the transcontinental railroad was begun, the "big five" financiers in California found the best way to get through solid granite and over the Sierra Nevada mountains was to hire the Chinese. They encouraged thousands to make the trip. Many of the stone walls and levees in Solano County were constructed by the Chinese.

Fairfield remained a quiet farm town with a four-block downtown until 1941, when the government chose a site to the east that benefited from the "Suisun" winds, to establish an airfield. The plan was to patrol the West Coast from possible Japanese invasion.

Soon that mission changed and the airfield was designated to fly men and supplies to the Pacific front. With the construction of the airfield, Fairfield's population boomed and it has been growing at an astounding clip ever since.

A fiery plane crash in 1950 outside the main gate would claim the life of General Travis. Aboard the B-29 bound for Korea was a 10,900-pound atomic Mark IV bomb. Five thousand pounds of high explosives exploded inside the atomic weapon.

Luckily, the nuclear capsule was not installed. Travis was so highly thought of by local civilians, political dignitaries and base officials that they urged the airfield to be renamed in his honor.

The artist of the Pepper Belly's mural, Lee Wilder-Snyder, would like to have a contemporary figure at the end of the mural, skateboarding into the future.

We can only guess what the future will look like. There is clear and powerful evidence of the past and those men and women who have shaped and contributed to the county starting with its name.

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