

Vallejos quest for the fountain of life

By Nancy Dingler

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When Josz de Ca-izares, sailing master of the San Carlos, sailed into San Francisco Bay and then subsequently San Pablo and Carquinez Straits in 1775, he jotted in his diary that the hills, what is now Vallejo were barren and without trees.

As Ca-izares made the first recorded foray into Solano County, he noted that it was not until Suisun Bay, before he found fresh water that could be drunk. If the City of Vallejo was to be developed it would need a source of water. There were two streams of water that might be sufficient.

On the eastern side of Sulphur Springs Mountain, near Benicia, flowed Sulphur Springs Valley Creek. Sulphur Springs Valley Creek emptied into the salt marsh, two miles north of the U.S. barracks, (Benicia arsenal)

On the western side of Sulphur Springs Mountain, Sulphur Springs Creek meandered three miles east of Vallejo. This creek empties to the west at Napa Bay.

Sulphur Springs Creek would become the source for Vallejos first water supply. As the name suggests, it was it was not the best water but it was better than drinking sea water.

The cost of developing the water system was so great that it would be 18 years from the time Vallejo became the state capital in 1852, until the first water system was initiated.

Sulphur Springs Creek, as do all the creeks in the county, fluctuates between an overflowing river during heavy rainy seasons to barely a trickle in the dry years. Because of this fluctuation, reservoirs, distribution mains and pipes would need to be constructed to contain the optimal run-off during the heavy winter storms.

Mare Island Naval Yard, established in 1854 by Admiral Farragut, would not have its water system for twenty-two years. In the absence of this vital commodity, enterprising outfits brought water barges from Benicia, Contra Costa and the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, where water was in better supply and sold it by the bucket or the barrel.

For many years, Mare Island was especially dependent upon the water bargemen. In 1870, the Vallejo Directory commented on the Navy Yard, 'the arrangements for

supplying the Yard with water are at present wretchedly defective. There is not a well in the Yard, and the inhabitants are compelled to use cistern water, not only for culinary, but drinking purposes.

At one point, an attempt was made to sink an artesian well, but after boring some four hundred feet, the appropriation gave out and the work was never resumed. It was feared that the unfinished well left the Yard vulnerable to enemy attack during war.

Finally in 1876, the U.S. Congress allotted funds to complete a reservoir on Mare Island, thus ending its dependency on less secure sources. Though the bargemen supplemented the water supply, many people still depended on wells, cisterns and barrels, which caught rain water coming off dirty roofs, that were exposed to bird and rat droppings.

Outhouses, referred to as earthclosets also contributed to the contamination of the well water supply.

The hazard to the health of the residents was obvious. The growth and development of a healthy and prosperous community was impossible without more secure and better water supply.

Entrepreneurial water companies appeared quickly, realizing the amount of money that could be made selling water. The Vallejo City Water Company petitioned the City of Vallejo in 1868 to lay down water pipes and erect hydrants and reservoirs within the city limits to supply water from the Sulphur Springs Creek.

The city awarded the franchise after negotiating, water for the extinguishments of fires gratuitously. The largest construction project was the establishment of the Chabot Reservoir, also known as Lake Chabot. The new water distribution system was based on gravity flow from Chabot to the city of 6500 inhabitants.

In 1890, a new era of public servants were elected to the citys Board of Trustees. John Frey was one of the newly elected.

He was a businessman who owned a jewelry and stationary store, but it was his perseverance, dedication and spirit which earned him the title: "Father of Vallejos Water System."

The city was tired of the water company running its own private fiefdom and acting cavalier about service to customers. The company was known for greeting every request for relief or refund with a stock statement, If you dont like the way we serve you, you can have your water shut off.

One of the first acts by Frey and the new board was to acknowledge the importance of a good reliable and wholesome water supply.

Evidently, those who had been in charge were not going quietly into the night. The Vallejo Water Company was determined to block any changes the city might pursue and any other water schemes that might rival their holdings.

The City of Vallejo finally had had enough.

They authorized the issuance of a quarter of a million dollar bond. Its purpose was to acquire 1,200 acres of Suscol Creek property. This proposal was blocked by the Vallejo Water Company by outbidding the city on the Suscol property and then filing an injunction.

The only way around the water company, which had plenty of coin, was to bring in water from a source and keep it secret.

John Frey was put in charge of bringing in water from the Green Valley Creek, with its never failing mountain stream of the purest and soft waters. Though pure and soft, the Green Valley source was twenty-one miles away.

It seemed impossible to keep secret the innumerable right-of-ways and the purchase of the 1657 acre watershed, along with the Hastings Ranch. So, a low pass for the transmission mains would have to be found.

It appeared insurmountable to accomplish all of these things for \$250,000. Frey dared not hire a surveyor to test the elevations, lest the news leak to the water company.

He purchased surveying equipment and made the measurements alone. His confidant was J.M. Gregory, a former Solano County Superior Court Judge. Gregory purchased the lands and finally, the system was ready to be constructed.

The Vallejo Water Company, lead by Mr. Remi Chabot was an ardent opponent and tried every trick in the book to stop the city from usurping his companys exclusivity to supply water.

In the end, Frey and the city prevailed and the project was completed.

On Jan. 27, 1894, 5,000 Vallejo residents gathered on that Saturday evening to celebrate the city owning its own water supply.

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