

Agriculture boosts Rio Vista as major port

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, April 30, 1995

Information for this article came from the Fairfield Library, Vacaville Heritage Council & Rio Vista Museum.

This is the second of two parts

(Last week: The Township of Rio Vista starts rolling and is suddenly washed away in torrential rains and flooding.)

Some of the inhabitants of Rio Vista resettled in other towns after they were rescued from the great flood. But four men, Sidwell among them, were determined to try to re-establish the town. They sent an inquiry to Gen. Vallejo about the weather situation. He responded that 20 years prior, the rains had caused flooding in that area. In fact, he had sailed right across the Los Ulpinos Grant on his way to Benicia! Abandoning any hopes for a town on the Bidwell tract, the men approached Joseph Bruning, a rancher, and asked to form a town at the far end of his ranch. Bruning had been a prosperous businessman in San Francisco, but failing health had forced him to relinquish his business and relocate to this area. He agreed to donate the land, took an active role in its beginnings and, hence, is looked upon as the town's founder.

In 1862, the "new" Rio Vista grew rapidly and some of the people from the old settlement returned. Hotels and stores were established. J.C. Carter built a two-story home that was the object of much comment. A prominent wharf was erected. The first church, a Catholic church, was built. A Congregational church followed. A school was also founded.

Rio Vista grew to become the largest town in the delta region. It was the main business center for this productive agricultural area and a place of residence for many of the growers of the area. The rebuilt town thrived as a center for salmon fishing, the dredging and building of levees and as a port for the varied agriculture products. In 1870 the Rio Vista Lodge was formed. Joseph Bruning sought to establish a school and in 1876 an academy for young ladies was started. This was under the direction of the Sisters of Mercy and was named St. Gertrude's Academy after Joseph Bruning's wife. In 1876 there were 12 students. By 1880 there were over 60. The charge for a semester, board and tuition, was \$112. Shortly after St. Gertrude's was established, the St. Joseph Military Academy for Boys started up, thus making Rio Vista an educational center in the Delta region. In 1877 a newspaper, the Weekly Gleaner, hit the streets.

The charming appearance of the town, picturesquely situated and sloping up from the river, was a cause of pride for the citizens. By the 1920s the streets were paved and the trees that lined the street were full-grown shade trees. There was a park centrally located in the heart of the town.

Rio Vista was often called "The Capital of the Netherlands" because of its importance as a port in the center of the productive Sacramento River delta region. The agricultural season was year round, making it one of the busier ports. November to March, celery. March to July, asparagus and fruit. July to November, beans and sugar beets. All these crops were grown on a large scale and shipped everywhere. Its water facilities accommodated the largest vessels and steamers called regularly. As a fishing port, Rio Vista thrived due to the excellent salmon fishing both for the commercial fishermen and sportsmen.

By the 1860s river traffic was abustle. As many as 100 steamers, sailing barks, brigs and brigantines passed by Rio Vista in a given week, many stopping to load and unload freight and passengers. The Chrysopolis was the best outfitted steamer of the day, providing the ultimate in river travel. It set the speed record for the run from Sacramento to San Francisco: five hours and 19 minutes, New Year's Eve day 1861. But steam boilers combined with the racing mind set of the captains made river travel a safety question for the passengers of the day. On Sept. 5, 1864, the steamer Washoe arrived in Rio Vista at 8 p.m. It was trailing the speedy Chrysopolis. Upon casting off, the captain of the Washoe, intent on passing the rival Chrysopolis, signaled for all the steam the engine room could deliver. The steamer got as far as Steamboat Slough when the boiler blew, killing over 50 people.

A year later, the steamer Yosemite pulled up to the Bruning Wharf for a 45-minute stop to unload and load freight and passengers. Among the new passengers was a group of Chinese laborers. Almost as soon as the steamer pulled away from the dock, the upper cabin, pilothouse and deck rose in flame. Bodies burned by scalding steam hurled through the air, landing in the river and on the wharf. Eighty passengers died instantly, about 40 more died in the ensuing hours. The burning wreck of a steamer heeled against the wharf. In a newspaper account a theory was put forth that the fault was due to water being low in the boilers and that the fault could not be due to defective iron as defective iron would have been noted in tests when the steamer was built. However, the court's finding was that the iron was defective and thus the steamer company was not to be at fault.

The Rio Vista Bridge was completed in 1919 at a cost of over half a million dollars. The bridge linked Rio Vista to the highway. The Solano Republican announced the opening: "The Rio Vista Bridge across the Sacramento River is one of the largest structures west of the Mississippi." That bridge was just replaced in recent years.

No longer is Rio Vista a central port for agricultural goods, but it is a center as a popular recreation area. Recreational boating thrives and it has become the center for windsurfing. According to one account it was named the best area for wind surfing in the world! Waterskiing is another popular sport here. Duck and pheasant hunters are seen during the hunting season.

Fishing has deteriorated from what it once was. Nevertheless, the fishing is still good and Rio Vista is a popular spot for the sports fisherman. Every October Rio Vista celebrates its fishing heritage with the Bass Derby contest.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/507>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/507/>