

Ferry changed bay transportation

By Jerry Bowen

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Dec. 1, 1879, was a grand day to launch into a new era of travel in the Bay Area.

At 9 a.m. the Solano, the largest ferry boat in the world, had 75 invited guests lined up on Oakland's Long Wharf for her maiden voyage. Among them were the Crockers, A.N. Towne, T.H. Goodman, E.C. Fellows, S.S. Montague, D. Huntington, L.B. Mizner, H.P. Stanwood, E.J. Brown, Ben. C. Truman, Col. Batchelder, Arthur Brown, A.J. Stephens, Captain Foster, J.H. Stowbridge, Marcus D. Borock and Alexander McAbee, all well-known dignitaries of the time.

She was designed to carry railroad freight and passenger cars between Benicia and Port Costa on the Carquinez Strait.

With a length of 424 feet and measuring 116 feet wide, the Solano could carry two locomotives with 24 passenger cars or 36 freight cars. Passengers leaving Oakland would board the old railroad and travel as far as Port Costa, then transfer the engines and fully loaded railroad cars on to the Solano. They were ferried to Benicia where they disembarked to continue on to Sacramento via the Benicia road, without ever having to leave their seats.

Curious sight-seers gathered at the wharf. A few stole aboard, posing as invited guests inspecting the vessel, but were soon discovered and ordered ashore.

The Solano was bright in her new paint and carried several flags. An American Jack and ship's flag bearing her name was forward, a signal flag amidships, and just before getting under way, an American flag and one bearing the initials C.P.R.R., were run up aft. At 9:50 a.m., the gangplank was pulled ashore, the Solano blew a prolonged whistle and steamed out on her maiden trip.

Once under way, the captain and crew carried out several system checks, including a test of the steering gear. In spite of her great size, the boat easily maneuvered through a series of short turns. Some of the machinery was a bit stiff, but was otherwise in good condition. They sailed around Alcatraz then headed for Benicia, hundreds of boats of every variety saluted her passing with whistles, and were acknowledged in turn.

The Solano was built to ferry heavy loads on her one-mile route across the Carquinez Strait at a top speed of about 12 mph, but only did about half of that for the major

portion of her maiden voyage

A salute was given and returned as the mighty ship steamed close to Mare Island. At 12:30 p.m., the passengers gathered round the cook's modest counters, which were lavishly laden with cold delicacies. Although, it was an informal banquet, the celebrities aboard ship seemed delighted with the novelty of the entire affair. Cigars were lit and glasses raised in toast to clear skies, smooth waters and Epicurean delights.

Shortly after 2 p.m. they were met at the pier in Benicia by several hundred enthusiastic citizens welcoming Mr. Crocker and the Solano, and a detachment of army soldiers under Lt. Lyons fired a 26-gun salute. Once docked, everyone was invited aboard and taken across the Strait to Port Costa.

The currents run very strong between Benicia and Port Costa, making navigation difficult. The Solano was equipped with two separate engines, which gave her extra maneuvering ability in tight spots. In spite of this added advantage, the first landing attempt at Port Costa failed. She struck the slip almost broadside, splintering the wooden pier and scattering astonished passengers about the deck.

After a successful second attempt, the San Francisco-bound passengers were ushered ashore to an awaiting train. The Solano steamed back to Benicia, where she remained for three weeks before beginning her regular scheduled service.

Ten years later, the groundwork that would spell the eventual demise of this magnificent vessel was in the making. The planning stage for building the Carquinez Bridge began in 1889, but actual construction did not get under way until 1928.

The Solano's longest serving skipper was Henry Williams. He was made second officer in 1902 and in 1905 first officer. He was promoted to captain in 1914 and served as her master until 1930.

The Carquinez Bridge was completed that same year and the aging ferry was retired after nearly 50 years of service with virtually no blemishes on her record. Her record of performance included the fact that she was so well designed that as the years went by, even as train engines and cars would become heavier, she continued to perform her arduous tasks with ease. After serving more than 27 years aboard ship, one can only imagine how Capt. Williams must have felt as he said farewell and stepped from her decks for the last time.

As for the fate of the Solano, I believe she was dismantled and the hull left to slowly decay and sink into the silt of Morrow Cove near the bridge. A typically sad ending for a great ship.

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