

1850's news of the day came through Benicia

By Kristin Delaplane

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(Part one of three)

The first newspaper to appear out of Benicia was the California Gazetter in 1851. It was followed by the Benicia Vedette. McGeorge & Cellers were the publishers of the Solano County Herald which debuted Nov. 5, 1855 and was published in Benicia. The subscription price for one year if paid in advance was \$5. The publishing company which had its office on First Street also offered services for book and job printing. The first editorial was to thank Capt. Thomas Seeley of the steamer Surprise for transporting the material for the paper to go into operation.

Many of the items that appeared in the paper were pulled from other newspapers; newspapers from back east as well as California. The out-of-town up-river newspapers came by boat. These included the Chronicle, Times & Transcript, Sacramento Union, State Journal, Evening News, Quincy's Old Mountaineer, Monterey Sentinel, and El Dorado News. Many of these made mention that there was a new paper operating in Benicia.

In short order the paper also had a regular feature from "The Wreath," a journal that was published weekly at the Benicia Female Seminary school.

The newspaper periodically listed the letters being held at the post office. There was also a listing of California post offices.

Toward year's end it was common for the newspapers to note the produce and livestock being raised in the area and other notable enterprises. The crops of Solano County were wheat, barley, oats, corn, potatoes, onions and broom corn. Livestock included horses, cattle, sheep, hogs and goats. There were three flour mills, two driven by steam and one by steam and water. Four artesian wells had been started at Benicia, Mare Island and Suisun City. None had been completed. Government at Work The first issue of the Solano County Herald included a tax list for Benicia; people's names, property owned and taxes due. In following weeks a delinquent tax list was published. Charles W. Hayden, president of the Council of the City of Benicia reported that taxes were for the following purposes: Twenty-five cents on each \$100 was to support the schools in the city. Fifteen cents on each \$100 was for paying the interest on the Funded Debt. The marshal was charged with collecting the taxes.

Meanwhile the sheriff of Solano County, Paul Shirly, was busy holding Sheriff's Sales.

When one party sued another and a judgment was found against the party, the sheriff would hold a sale on that person's property to pay off the debt and pay for costs. In one case a judgment was found against Isaac Taylor who lived in and had property in Vallejo. Sale of his property to settle up was held at the courthouse in Benicia. Later in the year the sheriff held a sale in a judgment of \$5,000 against Gen. Vallejo.

The Board of Supervisors meetings were an ongoing event. Mainly the meetings consisted of allowing or disallowing moneys to certain parties for services on behalf of the county, polling services and supplies used for county business such as stationery. The proprietor of the Solano Hotel was allowed \$12.50 for boarding prisoners. When Capt. Coffin made an application for a license to operate a ferry between Vallejo and Mare Island, the board rejected it for lack of legal conformity. The board also made some appointments such as Road Overseers. The total they collected over six months on licenses, taxes, fines, penalties and poll taxes came to \$3,402.65. Local Items The crew of the steamer John Hancock was paid off and while some left for the gold mines others stayed in town to spend their money. These sailors were last seen galloping their horses up and down First Street.

The race was on when two Vallejo stages came flying into Benicia neck and neck on a full run. Drivers and passengers were in danger of breaking their necks coming down the hill.

A marble quarry was discovered in the hills north of Suisun City and a company was being formed to begin quarrying in the spring of 1856. The shipping point for the marble was to be Suisun City. The editors noted that "it is hard to see how much more business can be accommodated there (Suisun City) than is already done. It is the point of embarkation of the produce of the county and has for the past few months been by far the busiest place in the county. Three stores are located there and a steam flour mill is in full blast. If any person desires to inform himself as to the wealth of our county he can go to Suisun City."

An extensive mine of cement was discovered in the Benicia city limits. It was white when dry and said to be of excellent quality all around.

An old man named Brown, who had been employed at the P.M.S. Works (aka Pacific Mail Steamship Co.) was found in the tules in a dying condition. When taken out, he was speechless. It was reported that he lost all when the Adams Co. failed and since then had been partially deranged. It was not expected that he would live through the night. (It is not clear what the Adams Co. was, but we challenge our historians to ferret out this sad business.)

When Isaac Jamison married Miss Carrie Russel of Sacramento City it was big news.

Isaac was the newly elected county assessor and resident of Green Valley. His wedding was announced in the paper in good humor by the gentleman who had been his opponent.

A traveling performing troupe arrived in Benicia, gave their performance and left for Vallejo the next day.

There was a wrestling match in Vacaville. One of the wrestlers was named McCord.

A social ball, a cotillion party, was given at Suscol House, which was located on what is Highway 29 today at the foot of the arching bridge on the way to Napa and Sonoma.

The ladies of the Benicia's Catholic church were preparing for a Christmas Day fair. The purpose was to save the church from financial embarrassment.

M. Atkins, principal of the Benicia Female Seminary, advertised the semi-annual public exams of the scholars to be held starting at 9 a.m. for two days running. This was a public staging of the young women's knowledge. They were tested in reading, spelling, geography, grammar, arithmetic and English history. The editors commented it was evident the students were not taught by rote, but to think for themselves. The young ladies gave a vocal and instrumental concert following the exams. Tickets were \$1 and the funds raised were for school supplies.

It was announced in December 1855 that the Vallejo Bulletin had suspended publication.

Christmas 1855 there was a ball in Vallejo with a supper served. Eateries, Saloons & Hotels M. Burkart's at First and D was a restaurant and board and lodging establishment. Special mention was made that with notice wedding parties could be supplied with all kind of cakes and ice cream.

The American Hotel was the first hotel from the steamer passenger landing. Clients were conveyed by carriage free of charge. It was publicized as a first class hotel and had been under the same management, C.M. Davis, for the past 6 years. All the comforts were said to be provided and all stage lines left from the hotel every morning headed for the various valleys. A livery stable was also connected with the house.

The Solano Hotel at the corner of First and E advertised that it was unsurpassed by any other house in the state for its superior and ample accommodations. Stages for Suisun, Napa and Sonoma left the hotel every morning.

Saloons were highly patronized with bright lights, "tin-pan" music, gaudy scenery and

girls.

The Sawyer House, a popular local saloon operated by an original town pioneer von Pfisher offered the best liquors and wines at 12 cents.

The Bengal House managed by Luke Bond was located opposite the American Hotel and offered the best in liquors and cigars.

The Arbor Saloon in Vallejo was run by Robert Webster who naturally advertised that he carried first quality wines, liquors and cigars.

The Oak Grove House was operated by Elijah True. It was a popular resort situated equi-distant from Napa, Benicia and Vallejo. The hotel was shaded by a beautiful and romantic grove of noble oaks. It was a spot, so True said, that was marked as a delightful retreat for pleasure parties. Napa and Benicia stages called there daily. A post office was established at this location that is unknown to us today.

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