

## Benicia a bustling, growing town in 1856

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First of four parts

New Year's 1856 was celebrated in Vacaville with a ball. The people were crowded in a local building to the point of suffocation. Editors of the Solano County Herald advised that their friends in that section of the county build a large hall for the purpose of future balls.

A group of 10 men gathered in Benicia to play cards that New Year's. A quarrel broke out, ending with a man named Murphy being severely cut in the cheek by a man named Green, who was later arrested.

On these wintry days, wood to heat the various stoves was in great demand. Cords of wood measuring 128 feet solid were offered at regular market prices by John Harding, while Richard Carr had long wood that could be delivered at a cost of \$10 per cord.

The town of Benicia had swelled to the point that rentals were available. Three family homes were advertised at low rents and several commercial buildings were open. In addition, homes were being sold. Lyman Leslie, a prominent Benician, had two such houses for sale at moderate prices.

In this bustling town, the post office was open from 8 to 5 every day except Sunday. On Saturdays it stayed open until 9. The mails were determined by the steamers. Mail destined to Stockton and Sacramento had to be in by 5; for San Francisco, by 9 p.m. Post offices throughout the county served as agents for the newspaper, as did the stops along the stage line route.

Benicia was in communication by telegraph with San Francisco, Stockton, Sacramento, Downieville, Mud Springs, Auburn, Diamond Springs and Placerville. A submerged cable connecting Benicia with Contra Costa County was to be in place later that year.

A few improvements were needed in the city: a culvert across First Street near the custom house; a walk across First Street at the location of the post office so that long boots would not be necessary to go across the street for letters. Lastly, a lantern was needed on the plank roads on dark nights as even those familiar with the terrain sometimes lost their footing. One rainy night a man was seen coming up over the edge of the planks, having taken a spill.

The hunting season was as good as ever. The hills and shores were lined with ducks and other wild fowl. It was noted that even a bad shot would bag some game, while the practiced sportsmen were bringing them away in wagons and boatloads.

News from Vallejo came from the Vallejo Bulletin, which had resumed publication under A.J. Cox. Items reported were a drowning accident when a sailboat capsized and a fire caused by an arsonist that completely destroyed a home. Historically, Cox is noted as a wandering printer, who invested in the printing press. He ultimately proved to be inconsistent in getting the issues out and the paper soon folded.

The news along the river was about a section of the water just past Benicia, the Hog's Back. When the steamers headed for Sacramento arrived at low tide, they were forced to wait until high tide so as to have sufficient water depth to pass over the Hog's Back. This factor made all realize that the Sacramento River was filling up and that every day navigation was becoming more difficult.

The editors assessed that at the present rate, it was only a matter of a few years before such boats as the New World and Defender would be unable to make the passage up river except at high tide. It was therefore imperative that a railroad be constructed from Marysville and Sacramento to Benicia, with Benicia being the point where one could meet up with all classes of vessels at all phases of the tide.

The Cordelia Hotel, which had formerly been managed by Capt. Kincaid, was taken over by H. Chysler. Chysler advertised that it was everything a country hotel should be, that the surrounding bay and valley were covered with almost every species of game and that the climate was the best California could boast. The bar was supplied with the best wines and liquors available in the San Francisco market at 12 1/2 cents a glass. The adjoining stables were supplied with the best hay and barley.

Some real estate transactions were noted. Two acres of land near Vallejo were valued at \$50.

Gen. Vallejo sold 600 acres to Randall Smith at \$2 an acre. R.E. Clarey bought 930 acres from the Armijo Rancho at \$5 an acre. At this time, 500 acres that William McDaniel owned was referred to being in Ulati Valley or the McDaniel tract.

John Roger (Rueger) was the proprietor of the Benicia Brewery at First and H streets. He advertised a large supply of fresh lager, beer and ale for individuals and hotels, barrooms, etc. Deliveries would be made at in Benicia and Vallejo free of charge.

The Orphean family, a traveling vocal musical group, gave several performances during a week's stay at the State House. The group, made up of Mr. A.N. Hamm, Mr. J.A.

Griswoldd, Mrs. M.A. Hamm, and Master A.L. Hamm, performed a series of solos, duets, trios and quartets.

An early-morning earthquake of some magnitude rattled the citizens of Benicia on Feb. 16, 1856. Two very unmistakable shocks were felt, and though no damage was noted, the last one caused buildings to shift four to five inches.

Going-out-of-business auctions were noted periodically. One was held at an establishment known as Ferry House at First and A streets. The auction featured furniture, bar and fixtures as well as a lot of hogs, chickens, a horse and a sailboat. This was announced as a fine opportunity for persons wanting to go into the restaurant business, as it was one of the best locations and one of the profitable houses in the city under proprietor Joshua Willard. (Willard Hotel operated at this same location under Joshua Willard in 1861.)

Another business that went on the auction block was the Ulalie House in Benicia. Cash only would be accepted. Included in the sale was all the furniture and bar fixtures. Demijohns, liquor kegs, tumblers, crockery ware, knives and forks, chafing dish, beds and bedding, lamps, tablecloths, chairs, oil cloths were for sale. Also a cow, calf and a lumber wagon. A month or so later the successful dry goods store venture of Moore and Allen expanded when it built an addition to the store by removing the old Ulalie House.

It was announced that Jose S. Berryessa was the administrator of the estate of Antonio Maria Armijo, who had passed away in 1849. A sale was to be held at the courthouse in Benicia to auction the right, title and interest that the deceased had at the time of his death: the track of land known as Tolenas or Ulati Grant or the Armijo claim amounting to three square leagues.

Washington's birthday was a good reason to celebrate. The Catholic Church in Benicia held a fair at the State House for which the military post's band volunteered its services. Tickets were \$1. Hours for these events were fixed; doors opened at 5 and dancing commenced at 12 a.m. To celebrate the same occasion, Elijah True proprietor of the Oak Grove House in Solano County gave a cotillion party at his residence, Oak Grove farm.

Benicia's original pioneer, von Pfister, took over the El Dorado Saloon opposite the American Hotel. He immediately reduced the price of billiards and ten-pin to 25 cents per game. Later advertisements showed that he went into partnership with a man named Brown. The El Dorado was called a bowling and billiard saloon that featured the best liquors and cigars.

A stray brown bay California horse was found in the Sulphur Springs Valley by William H. Nichols. This valley was located just north and outside of Benicia. Nichols announced that if the owner did not come forward, he would sell the horse.

For those suffering winter fevers and chills or other aches and pains, the Benicia Drug Store sold the latest cures. There was Curtis' Inhaling Hygean Vapor & Cherry syrup for the relief and cure of all pulmonary complaints; Radway's Ready Relief was a magic tonic for just about any ailment including rheumatism, lumbago, gout, swollen joints, burns, scalds, syphilis, scrofula and diseased blood; Dr. Guysott's improved extract of Yellow Dock and sarsaparilla tonic and Dr. M'Lane Liver Pill were other popular cure-alls. For those not under the weather, Lyon's Pure Jamaica Ginger was available for delightful culinary results.

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