

Horse racing popular in summer of 1856

By Kristin Delaplane

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Third in a series Citizens of Solano County celebrated Independence Day 1856 with balls in Suisun City and at Tufts on Putah Creek, where a large crowd gathered. Between Benicia and Vallejo was A.P. Ryerson's Half Mile Track, and the races were on. For a purse of at least \$40, there was a free-for-all, one-mile race with trotting horses. At least two horses made a race. The second featured event was a maiden race of 400 yards for Spanish horses. The purse was at least \$20.

The big event that summer was the State Teachers Institute convention in Benicia. Meetings were held at Benicia High School. The California Steam Navigation Co. provided the teachers free passage, and hotels offered reasonable rates with coaches to and from the steamers for the ladies attending.

Essays were requested, and among the possible topics were "Training The Pupil To Understand And Appreciate The Practical Effect Of His Studies," "The Best System for Learning Vocal Music Where the Teacher is Not a Musician," "The Evil Effects of Badly Constructed School Room Seats, Desks," and "Lack Of Blackboard and Bad Ventilation."

Jos, a 16-year old Indian boy who had been adopted by a Mr. Goodyear, died at the family ranch.

Murderer Beverly Wells escaped from the Contra Costa jail, but was captured within 75 yards. Later that day he nicked his neck in a suicide attempt. He was to attempt suicide one more time before his execution.

A midnight charivari - a mock serenade for newlyweds - with kettles, tin horns, and boys' drums was given one of Benicia's citizens. A while later, W.W. Allen and bride were serenaded by the U.S. Band from the barracks.

Capt. Ord's artillery company returned from the Rogue River War in Oregon after being gone eight or nine months.

A boat capsized in the straits, and two men would have drowned had not Peter Pease jumped in a boat and rescued them.

A \$5 reward was offered for the recovery of a pair of gents' boots wrapped in

newspaper that were lost on the Vallejo-Benicia road.

A Benicia ordinance passed prohibiting the slaughter of animals in the city. Another ordinance was that every house must have two buckets per story, each able to hold 3 gallons, hung in some accessible, conspicuous place in case of fire. Additionally, there was to be a cask with 50 gallons of water nearby. There was a \$5 fine per day for not adhering to the ordinance.

The Napa Stage turned over while making a turn in front of the Solano Hotel. Fortunately, the passengers were not hurt.

Various political groups were forming due to the upcoming presidential election. The Democratic Club of Benicia established a reading room for the dissemination of political information. It implored the citizens to unite to established a library and reading room that would be free to all after the election.

The Miners and Settlers convention was to be held in September in San Francisco, and Solano County was allotted four delegates.

The steamer New World collided with a sloop shortly after leaving the wharf. Damages to the steamer were in the neighborhood of \$1,000.

A yawl was found adrift and was to be sold if not claimed.

The co-partnership of William B. Nurse and D.A. Nurse was formed for the purpose of transacting general merchandise and as a forwarding business at Nurse's Landing. Nurse had a jewelry and clock business in Benicia.

The high cost of doing business in Benicia was illustrated in the following report. Per-quarter livery stables paid the city \$30; liquor sales, \$32; monte bank, faro bank or other banking games, \$50; billiards and 10-pin, \$25 per table; public dance houses, \$100. Vehicles for jobbing: two-horse, \$10; one-horse, \$6; water carts or wagons, \$10 and drays, \$6. Public exhibitions, caravans, shows, wax figures, sleight of hand, rope or wire dancing, circus or theatrical performances paid \$20 for the first show and \$10 ensuing shows. Any vessel selling cargo to the general public paid 1 percent of the sales.

The Benicia Flouring Co. was having reverses; creditors were asked to present their claims.

A number of miscellaneous items illustrates the business activity of the day. Beatrix was advertising for a teaching position. The Carriage Depository had buggies and

harnesses for sale. A telegraph office was established on First Street. Joseph Summers was in the business of well and cistern sinking.

The new stage to Napa's White Sulphur Springs was operated by the proprietors of the American Hotel, who had received numerous requests from the patrons of that fashionable springs resort. Breakfast was served before the stage left at 6:30 a.m. A stop at Napa was made to change horses. The stage reached the springs at noon. The cost for this 5 1/2-hour trip was \$4.

Wolfskill sent grapes, peaches, pears and figs for the editors to sample. Peaches were in abundant supply and wagon loads were coming to Benicia from the Barber ranch in Suisun Valley. Grapes were sold at the local drug store.

The Fireman's Ball with a \$5 admission was to raise funds for Solano Engine Co. No. 1.

During a performance by a circus, the tent came down on the audience.

Professor von Dorf came to town and delivered a lecture on astronomy. Topics included the plurality of worlds and celestial scenery. There were also experiments in electricity, laughing gas and ventriloquism.

The Mountain Fairy Troupe gave a concert in town, the name being derived from two little girls in the troupe.

The Sons of Temperance had a ball in Benicia with a \$5 admission.

Ian Smith of Benicia was hiring out his milch cows by the month or year. Joseph Bassford of Sulphur Springs Valley had 100 milch cows he was offering to dairymen.

Dogs were favored in these pioneer days. Two ads were placed for lost dogs. One was a black bull puppy, the other a white terrier pup.

A large drove of cattle was purchased by H. Muler.

A shark measuring eight feet in length was caught in the straits and was a great curiosity to Benicians.

The Benicia Depot had 32 oxen for sale.

In August, several more droves of cattle crossed the Martinez ferry for various parts of Solano County.

Thomas Barnicle was questioned in the death of William Sanders in Vallejo. Sanders had been suffering delirium tremors. Neighbors were awakened by a fight and Sanders' cries. When they entered the house, Barnicle was bruised and Sanders was bruised about the head and was dead. Nevertheless, the doctor found nothing to suggest death was caused by anything other than natural causes resulting from the man's condition.

A committee was formed to establish a library and reading room in Vallejo.

In September, Thomas Cummings was captured with three horses he supposedly stole in Sacramento. He made his \$1,000 bail and escaped.

The Solano Sulphur Springs was located three miles from Vallejo and six miles from Benicia. Milton Brockman was the proprietor. The rooms were large and well-ventilated. The spring waters were strongly impregnated with minerals and considered by some the best natural medicinal waters in California. Commodious baths were available and there were several other mineral springs nearby.

John Ward made an application to establish a public ferry between Mare Island and Vallejo.

In the Suisun Valley in August, farmers were threshing the grain they had harvested and expected to be done by the month.

There was a Methodist camp meeting in the Suisun Valley in a oak grove. Solano historian Bert Hughes says this was likely Clayton's Grove, located near Mankas Corner. The camp was under the supervision of C. Ramsey, John Stilts, A. Jackson and Stevenson, and during the 11-day event a large number of clergy made appearances.

Five hundred people attended from the county and neighboring counties. Six hundred to 800 attended the Sunday service. Services started at 9 a.m. and continued until after night fall. Tents were set up to accommodate those who came. One 16-by-60-foot enclosure was divided into three sections: one for preachers, one for ladies and one for gentlemen. There were two long tables that could seat a total of 150 people. All could eat at no charge.

Forty-two people joined the church. A donation was asked for so as to collect \$3,000 to erect a church on the spot. In the end, they collected \$4,000. The church was to be made of stone and measured 40 feet by 16 feet by 18 feet. In that year, property was donated and likely the funds were used to erect the Rockville Church that is standing to this day.

Another camp meeting was scheduled for later that year in the Putah district.

Meanwhile, Suisun City was growing. A flourishing business was being conducted in the sale and shipment of produce and the manufacturing of flour. A three-story brick building was erected by Hiram Rush to be occupied as a store by McCrory and Ballard. The upper portion was to be the Masonic Hall. Mr. Reeves put up another brick building and Mrs. Lemons was constructing a building to be occupied as a store by them.

Ms. McKnown and Bishop were in Benicia for a short time, producing Ambrotype photos. They left to set up a studio in Suisun City. When they left, local photographer Peter Wright was set up to offer Ambrotypes.

Solano marble, a natural alabaster, was discovered in the Suisun Valley. The only other of its kind was discovered in Asia, but those quarries were exhausted by then. It had the appearance of petrified wood, but was capable of taking on a high polish. The editors of a Sacramento paper recommended that the columns of the state capital might be made from it.

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