

## **Local Copperheads lauded Lincoln's death**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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Tomorrow is Presidents Day. One of our most revered presidents is Abraham Lincoln, but it wasn't always so.

During his term of office, he was the subject of much derision, especially from a group known as "Copperheads."

I must admit, I didn't know too much about this organization until I decided to write something related to tomorrow's holiday.

The term "Copperheads" comes from the American Civil War and applies to Northern members of the Democratic Party, also known as Peace Democrats, Peace Societies, Peace at any Price, or militant groups working to overthrow the existing government and interfere by force, or otherwise with the conduct of the War between the States.

They were often identified by the medallions and buttons members wore made from cutouts of the Liberty Head on copper pennies of the time, hence the term "Copperheads."

The Copperheads opposed the administration of Abraham Lincoln and advocated compromise with the Confederate states to end the war. However, not all of them were sympathetic to the Southern position in the war. Many objected to the war on the grounds that the conquest of the South was illegal or impossible. In fact, nowhere does the Constitution say it was illegal for a state to secede from the Union.

In Vacaville Township, unlike most of the rest of Solano County, voters cast their support solidly behind the Democratic party, with few exceptions, from 1855 to 1880.

When the Whig Party disbanded in 1855, the majority of the members in this area moved to the Democratic Party mostly because it supported their rural interests. Many of the citizens were also from the South and their sympathies were with the Confederates when the Civil War broke out.

Vacaville became known as a hotbed of Copperhead sympathies in Solano County, although there were other groups of dissidents spread throughout the county.

President Lincoln was assassinated April 14, 1865, by John Wilkes Booth. Feelings on

both sides of the fence in Solano County ran high as Copperheads celebrated the assassination.

A short article in the April 19, 1865, edition of the Solano Press said, "We hear it is reported that some foolish individuals have even ventured to publicly rejoice at the assassination of President Lincoln. Such damnable wretches should have benefit of a little judicious hanging. If they were shot down on the spot and sent to the deepest Hell, no injustice would be done to any person except, perhaps, to the devil."

Indeed, there were celebrations and retaliation. One of the better known incidents was the "Green Valley Treason," as it was called then.

On hearing the news, 10 men, including Charles Ramsey and his sons, with Copperhead persuasions, celebrated the assassination at the Ramsey Home. Lt. Col. Hooker was sent to arrest them and during a brief gun battle, two soldiers were wounded. The celebrants were arrested and put into the military prison at Benicia. Ultimately, they were released and later filed suit for damages.

Feelings ran high against the Copperheads as the newspapers further inflamed the readers with no-punches-pulled rhetoric like, "... loyal men think it is high time that the aiders and abettors of treason here, as well as in Dixie, whose moral stench is exceeded only by the poisonous effluvia exhaled from the river of death, should be made to feel that Quantrells, Kenedys, Sue Mundayes, Bealls and Booths, with Jeff Davis commissions in their pockets, and the commission of deeds of arson, rapine and assassination in their hearts and hands, cannot longer be tolerated in the loyal state of California. The Pro-Slavery Democratic Party, thank God, is dead and stinketh."

Other incidents around the county cropped up as Southern Loyalists celebrated.

Near Maine Prairie, a man named Balaam Davis expressed his joy at the murder and said it ought to have been committed long ago. Some of the members of the Maine Prairie Rifles went out and arrested the "secesh gentleman."

He was taken before Justice Bingham and, according to an article in the Solano Press, "... the oath of allegiance was administered with due solemnity, and then the offender was kicked into the street and allowed to skedaddle."

A more serious episode resulted in murder by using the Lincoln assassination as means of retaliation. At Bridgeport (Cordelia today), Charles English and his two sons were cutting wood without permission on Perry Durbin's land. Durbin stopped them with an injunction. In retaliation, Charles English made an official complaint to the military authorities charging Durbin and others with treason for rejoicing over Lincoln's

assassination and Durbin was arrested.

Months later at the voting polls, Durbin and Charles English were talking when Durbin made a motion as if to draw a weapon on English. Charles pulled a revolver and shot Durbin, hitting him in the chest and shoulder. In an attempt to escape, he stumbled and fell. Durbin lunged and cut his throat. When Perry English ran to assist his brother, he was fatally shot by Frank Grady. When the elder English saw what was happening, he went to his sons' aid, whereupon Durbin stabbed him.

In another occurrence, opponents of the Vacaville Copperheads apparently burned down the Pacific Methodist College of Vacaville a few days after the assassination of Lincoln. The college, founded by the Methodist Church, South, was believed to support the secessionists.

Conspiracy theories continue to this day over who was ultimately responsible. The list included Vice President Andrew Johnson, who incidentally, was later impeached while in office, but by one vote was not removed from office. The Confederacy and Copperheads were blamed, bankers in Europe led by the Rothschilds were accused as conspirators and even the Roman Catholic Church was implicated in one of the speculations.

Many have investigated and written about Lincoln's assassination but we will probably never know the entire circumstances leading to his murder.

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