

Benicia-Martinez Bridge makes history

By Jerry Bowen

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A letter from Ross Noonan brought an error to my attention in the article about the ferryboat Solano, published January 7. At the end of the article I indicated the Carquinez Bridge was responsible for putting the Solano out of business. Well, that was the wrong bridge and wrong year. I should have stuck to the rule of checking my facts from at least two verifiable sources. In this case I didn't, but having to re-check my facts gave me fodder for another article.

There were clues that should have sounded the alarm. The Solano was primarily a train ferry, and the Carquinez bridge was for automobiles. The Carquinez bridge was opened in 1927 and the Solano and Contra Costa, continued to operate at full capacity until 1930.

So, what was responsible for the demise of the great train ferries, Solano and her larger and newer sister ship, the Contra Costa? Logic would indicate it was a railroad bridge, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

In 1868, the California Pacific Railroad established a line from Sacramento and Calistoga to Vallejo and in 1869, a passenger ferry service from Vallejo to San Francisco.

In July, 1871, Central Pacific made an offer to buy California Pacific RR. The offer was turned down, so Central Pacific announced it would run a parallel track to the head of Suisun Bay and cross the Carquinez Straits at Benicia. Damaged roadbeds caused by the floods of 1871-2, and insufficient capital to support expansion and repairs caused California Pacific major problems. Finally, California Pacific caved in and sold out in 1876 to Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR).

CPRR had plans to establish a shorter route to San Francisco. At the time, the route was from Sacramento to Oakland by way of Stockton through Niles Canyon and over Altamont Pass.

In 1877, CPRR began building what I call the "disappearing railroad" from Suisun to Benicia, integrating it with the former California Pacific route. A portion of the roadbed ran along the edge of the Suisun-Benicia shoreline through marshland to Carquinez Strait. For the next few years the rails had the habit of sinking into the unstable terrain. Hundreds of thousands of tons of rock, gravel and other materials were poured into the

voracious marsh before the rails were finally sufficiently stabilized enough to continue construction. The line was finally usable by 1879, but continued to require constant maintenance.

Central Pacific built the ferry Solano in 1878 and established a railroad at Port Costa that connected to Oakland. The Solano was designed to transport entire freight and passenger trains between Benicia and Port Costa. This new route was about 50 miles shorter and saved approximately one hour of travel time.

In 1914, the Southern Pacific Railroad Company took over Central Pacific. Increased population and travel demands resulted in the addition of the ferry Contra Costa in the same year. Built slightly larger and wider, it assumed the title, from the Solano, of the largest ferry in the world.

At the time the Solano was placed into service, neither freight nor passenger traffic justified the expense of building a bridge across the Carquinez Strait. However, traffic increased and, as early as 1880 and again in 1914, the railroad engineers considered sites for the construction of a bridge.

By 1927 the Solano and the Contra Costa reached their maximum capacity by carrying 98,262 passenger cars and 48,130 freight cars and demand continued to grow.

After 10 more years the Southern Pacific was convinced that a better means of crossing the strait was needed. On May 31, 1928, the railroad authorized the construction of a bridge.

Construction of the Benicia-Martinez Bridge began on May 1, 1929, and was completed in 18 months. The first passenger train crossed the bridge on October 15, 1930, and a formal dedication took place on November 1, 1930. The bridge extends from Suisun Point north of Martinez on the south shore of Suisun Bay to Army Point, Benicia, on the north shore - a distance of one and one-sixteenth miles, or 5,603 feet.

It was then that the careers of the ferries, Solano and Contra Costa, were ended. Solano was dismantled and the hull sank and rotted away at Morrow Cove. The Contra Costa was dismantled at Oakland and sold for junk. What a shameful ending for the two largest ferryboats that have ever been built, even to this day. An overflow of passengers crowded the decks for the last memorable ride in 1930.

The Benicia-Martinez Railroad Bridge is still in use after 70 years of continuous operation. An automobile toll bridge was built alongside in 1962 and is often filled to capacity, especially during commute hours.

Interestingly, history seems to be repeating itself in the form of passenger ferries from Vallejo to San Francisco and talk of more railway transportation to ease freeway congestion. It appears we are coming full circle.

Thank you Mr. Noonan. Because of folks like you, we are likely to record history more accurately, and that is as it should be.

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