

Civil War-era Solano full of commotion

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, June 22, 1997

The New Year's news was about the "great Christmas fight" in Silveyville. A Suisun man, a "pure Union man," was visiting those parts when a drunk "Secesh Smith", also know as "Curly Headed Smith", started looking for a fight.

He spit a tirade of abuse at the Suisun man, who took it for a while. Getting no reaction, Secesh Smith got an ax and further armed himself with pieces of iron.

At this the Union man lit into him and laid him low, kicking him a couple of times in that position for good measure.

Silveyville's Secesh Smith had stabbed a man a few years before and was noted for getting drunk and making a being a general nuisance. (In 1863, Silveyville's secessional newspaper was published by a group including a man by the name of Pierce who had assaulted Dr. Ogburn in 1862, nearly murdering him. It is speculation that this is the attack alluded to in this story.)

A number of people from Pleasants Valley traveled to Sacramento to attend that Fireman's Ball. The partygoers danced the spider dance and the money-musk, and they sang and acted out skits.

Benicia's New Year's party was attended by the best families and the several hundred dollars raised were earmarked for improvements to the Benicia Cemetery.

However, some unfavorable things were said by one malcontent on the subject of Benicia. "The prices are exorbitant. If you have money, you have plenty of friends. If your pockets are light, friends are scarce. The town is very quiet - not being business enough to keep 50 'Chinamen' at work."

New Year's night in Benicia an arsonist set fire to a large stable owned by McLaughlin and located in the rear of the American Hotel. The structure could not be saved.

The net from the receipts for the Fireman's Ball in Suisun came to \$98.75. This was money to pay for the exchange of bells. The unsatisfactory 132 pounds bell was being to be returned for one weighing 534 1/2 pounds.

H. Hubbard & Co. publishers of the Solano Press were located in Suisun City. Henry

Hubbard was the justice of peace and a conveyancer. His offices were in Wheaton's Building over William F. Halsey's store.

Only one person had been sent to the Stockton asylum in 1863. Hubbard speculated that the same number would be taken in 1864 - probably the editor of the Solano Herald, Hubbard's bitter rival.

Sixty-six marriage licenses had been issued in Solano County in 1863 and 22 people had applied for citizenship. In 1863, 82,828 acres were cultivated compared with 44,454 acres in 1860.

M. R. Miller of the Pioneer Ranch in Pleasants Valley was selling foreign grape cuttings. At the time, Green Valley wine was selling for four bits a bottle.

In other agriculture news, C.C. Terry of Benicia was raising cotton.

The Civil War was, of course, the news of the day. Wisely's Diorama of the War was on exhibit at the Union Hall. It was rated by a local "critic" as not equal to some exhibits, but still worth seeing.

In Benicia, four prisoners were heavily shackled and under the death sentence for desertion.

On a lighter note, The Suisun Light Dragoons announced their intention to hold a military dress ball February 22.

The Cosmopolitan Saloon was open for business in hectic Suisun City. At A. Chrisler's Saloon A. S. Baker and E. S. Wetherby were charged with dealing faro. A. Chrisler and H. J. Bartlett were arrested for allowing the game to be played on their premises.

Vallejo's Edward Frisbie wasn't have much luck. His leg had been broken from being thrown from a wagon to which an unbroken colt was attached. Some months previous, his leg had been broken from a horse fall.

An earthquake was felt by a few that winter.

On his way to Silveyville, photographer Martin passed through Suisun City and offered his services.

The steamer Yosemite was having a new cylinder made at the Benicia Iron Works. It was said to be the largest cylinder ever cast in the state, being 56 inches in diameter with a 10 foot stroke.

The steamship Constitution broke its shaft and was having a new one constructed at the Pacific Works (Pacific Mail Steamship Co.). While waiting, the vessel was lying in at the Benicia waterfront.

A new ferry was running between Collinsville and Antioch. At the helm was Capt. Turner.

To accommodate the growing population in Suisun, 60 new glass boxes were installed at the post office. Rent was 50 cents a quarter.

William Losh, postmaster and telegraph operator, was accidentally shot by an employee of the Sacramento post office. Passing through town, the Sacramento man out of courtesy called in at the local post office. Losh offered to show him the town. They wound up at Chrisler's saloon. Their conversation flowed to merit of arming oneself and the Sacramento man reached in his pocket to show his pistol when it unexpectedly went off, the ball sticking Losh's jaw bone and then lodging in his neck. The doctors Norman and McMahn extracted the ball and declared the wound "not serious."

Sumner A. "Sam" Shorey's City Hotel had a minor fire. The Union Co. was on hand, including Peko, the town's vegetable dealer, and Antonio.

(This harkens back to a report in 1863 about the fire drill. When it came time to "take up the hose" things fell apart. The two in charge disagreed as to how it should be done. The first man appealed to those around in English with a sprinkling of Gaelic. The second man, Antonio, became very excitable and was gesticulating wildly.

This was followed by a spurring of words reportedly in English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, German and Latin.)

The editor stated there should be an election to approve levying a tax to build and furnish a school for Suisun City.

S.B. Abernathy, who had purchased the Sheldon Ranch in Suisun Valley, went to Sacramento on a business. While he was gone, his cook Fred absconded with \$2,800 Abernathy had stashed in a trunk. Abernathy came back only to swiftly travel to San Francisco to talk to the police there about what could be done to apprehend the thieving cook.

John Maywood, a 38-year-old and a volunteer for the Vallejo fire company, had worked at Mare Island for 10 years. While at sea aboard the steamer St. Louis, he jumped overboard. The crew was unable to save him.

Thirty camels arrived in Benicia. The citizenry had just returned from church when the "huge and somewhat repulsive forms" rolled up the principal streets. This, much to the alarm of the horses and the astonishment of children. The camels were ordered to Benicia by the government and were to be sold to transport goods over the barren wastes of Nevada.

Even though a patrol of eight men walked the streets of Benicia every night to take drunken soldiers back to the garrison guard house, a few soldiers got out of hand one night. Drunk, they broke a window and stormed the Solano Hotel. A boarder trying to leave the premises, had his coat torn from him and was badly beaten. A carriage came by and the group seized the horses which threw the man from the buggy.

They then threatened the hotel's proprietor, Weinmann, with a bottle of beer and beat his assistant, Charles Burkhardt, taking his watch. One man even struck Mrs. Weinmann in the face with a fist. Lastly, they grabbed a kitchen knife and threatened all.

There were at this time 450 men at the barracks. A hundred were members in good standing of the Good Templar and 39 were members of the Lodge of Sons of Temperance.

But the temptation was great for the regular soldiers. As noted, there were seven places to obtain liquor on Bottle Hill, in Benicia proper there were 11 more drinking establishments and in the suburbs, three more.

Ben Peyton, proprietor of the Washington Market in Suisun got a ribbing in the paper. "We love music, but when Ben Peyton makes such an awful noise in the meat market we feel like pulling off our coat and gently remonstrating him."

There was to be an Anniversary Ball at Hill's Hall at Maine Landing (Maine Prairie). The supper was going to be at King's Hotel.

Jack Spruce, a cussing man from Vallejo, was taken to jail for beating his wife. The officials informed him he could be released if he took an oath not to drink for one year.

He was released, though taking the oath was in truth a joke. Nevertheless, Spruce didn't realize it was a joke and was sure that was why he was a free man.

Editor's Note: The Historic Markers Committee is seeking \$30 donations. This money will go toward placing bronz plaques on historic buildings and sites (such as the Vaca-Pena wattle hut and Vaca's adobe.) Send donation to: Historic Markers, c/o City Hall, 650 Merchant Street, Vacaville 95688. Suggestions and local historical information

for this column are welcome. Write biographer-historian Kris Delaplane Conti in care of The Reporter, 916 Cotting Lane, Vacaville 95688.

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