

The Sperry Pioneers

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The Sperry Division of General Mills in South Vallejo is undoubtedly Vallejo's oldest non-governmental enterprise, and is one of the larger private employers in Solano County (others, Yuba Manufacturing, Nut Tree, Gibson Publications). Today's story is a fascinating tale beginning with the gold rush, but Vallejo enters the picture in 1869.

AUSTIN SPERRY ARRIVES IN CALIFORNIA

Austin Sperry arrived in 1852 to search for gold. After panning gold for 23 days and observing high prices everywhere, he was convinced there were greater riches in providing food for the army of prospectors. Sperry's advent into the milling business was the subject of a recent Historical Society talk by George Derr, former superintendent of the South Vallejo mill and more recently Vice-Mayor of Vallejo.

In 1852 Austin Sperry erected his first mill in Stockton, to grind wheat into flour and to provide feed, also, for the horses and mules which pulled the wagons from tidewater into Sierra mining camps.

A SETBACK AND FURTHER GROWTH

After a fire which destroyed the Stockton mill in 1855, Sperry was joined by a Samuel Baldwin and a cousin, Samuel Sperry, and a larger mill was built. In 1862, after several expansions, the firm name was changed to Sperry Mills. After Austin's death in 1881 his four children carried on the business. A merger of 5 other mills was consummated in 1892. Sperry Drifted Snow, the trade name known throughout the world, was first packed in Salinas in 1881.

VALLEJO ENTERS THE STORY

In 1867 the idea of erecting elevators in Vallejo was proposed by G. C. Pierson of Chicago, later associated with Starr and Pierson of San Francisco. This original project didn't materialize but in the following year construction did begin under President D. W. Rice of the Cal. Pac. R.R. Co.; General J. B. Frisbie, and others. Charles Wheeler, a grain merchant of Oswego, N.Y., joined the venture and became the first superintendent. The Vallejo Chronicle of May 22, 1869, describes in great length the type of construction of the Vallejo Elevator, as it was then called. It lists the 700 supporting pilings, the 12 x 12 inch posts and the 12 x 18 :inch joists, and the 10 by 20

feet bins. The capacity was 10,000 tons, and the operation was geared to receiving wheat from either freight cars from the CPRR or via barge from the interior valleys. On June 23, 1869, the Elevator was put in service and the first wheat arrived.

WE WERE NATION'S LEADING WHEAT PORT

In 1869 and 1870 Vallejo was the leading seat port in this country—James J. Hill hadn't yet built the railroads into the upper Missouri valley. Practically all of the Vallejo wheat went to Liverpool, England—mostly by clippers, and around Cape Horn. It is difficult for Vallejoans today to believe so much traffic plied Mare Island straits, but let's look at the loadings for just six months in 1869. The first ship left on Aug. 6th, the Clipper STAR OF HOPE, bound for Liverpool. The same day the barque LIZZIE WILLIAMS arrived to load wheat.

The parade then continues. On Aug. 13th the ship BRITISH NAVY was loaded; the ship BARROWDALE arrived on Aug. 22nd, and created considerable interest as it was an iron ship. Later that month the Clipper ESMERALDA and the HERALD OF THE MORNING had come and gone. By Christmas Day of 1869, other departures from Vallejo included the ST. LUCIE, POCAHONTAS, NATIONAL EAGLE, FAVORITA, NEREUS, FLORIS, KILDONAN, HIGHLANDER, AMITY, JULIET and ST. JAMES. In all, 22 ships cleared here in less than six months! The wheat was valued at \$1,254,000!

SPERRY PURCHASES THE ELEVATOR

The Vallejo Elevator became the Starr Mills and in 1894 the Sperry firm purchased it. The new owners promptly closed the plant! A year later G. W. McNear, the "Wheat King of California," reopened the mill under the name of Port Costa Milling Co. McNear operated the mill for about 11 years.

Sperry brought the plant back into its system in 1906 following the San Francisco fire. In 1914 construction was begun on a complete new mill on the site and on Nov. 22, 1917, Plant Superintendent Jesse E. Godley (one of the charter members of the Vallejo Rotary Club) pulled the slide in a spout to release the first wheat to the grinders.

One of Vallejo's most spectacular fires destroyed the Sperry dock bins on August 30, 1934—a total of 21 bins of grain, 500,000 grain bags and 2 large marine elevators were lost. A large part of the present plant was rebuilt following that blaze.

In 1929 a number of milling companies in the United States combined to form the corporate structure of General Mills. Sperry Mills was one of these. Contrary to some impressions, Sperry's was not "acquired" by any one—it is a "plank-owner" in its

present organization.

PRESENT OUTPUT AND EMPLOYMENT

Today's operation in South Vallejo is quite different from the early days of 1869. It began as a strictly grain shipping operation, then went through diversified milling operations which included meals and formula foodstuffs for poultry (ever hear of "Surelay"), rabbits and stock, until today where the local plant concentrates on flours. Under the management of the present superintendent, Russell H. Dean, Jr., the Sperry Division of General Mills employs about 150 men and women, and ships an average of 12 freight cars of its products every working day.

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