

Contra Costa 'Other Coast'

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Contra Costa, meaning the "opposite coast," is no longer a stranger. The water barriers have gradually broken down. About Dec. 28, 1885, a ferry carried the first train across Carquinez Strait. Vehicular ferries connected Benicia with Martinez, Vallejo with Valona. In 1927 came the Carquinez Bridge, followed by the Antioch Bridge, then the railway bridge. And about three years ago the Martinez Bridge and the second Carquinez span.

Today hundreds of Solano people work in Contra Costa industries. Other hundreds of Contra Costans work in Mare Island. Thousands of Solano residents traverse the highways on the "opposite coast" on their way to Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco. The Times-Herald sent Jim Ritch (originator of the "It's Rich" column) to Matrinez, and now Wyman Riley of this historical column is a publisher on the "opposite coast". Let's talk a bit to-day about our neighbors. Especially because it was their coal that cooked Vallejo's meals and heated Vallejo's homes for nearly 40 years.

MANY COAL MINES ON MT. DIABLO

Few of the present generation realize the tremendous amount of coal mined and shipped from Suisun' Bay ports in Contra Costa. These mines were on the northeastern slopes of Mt. Diablo, some four or five miles south of Pittsburg and Antioch. The activity began in 1855 with the opening of the Norton Mine, operated by D. O. Mills of early California fame. Then followed the Cumberland Mine and later the extensive Black Diamond. At first the coal was moved to Suisun Bay wharves by oxen and horses; later two or three rail lines were constructed. Two towns came into being—Nortonville and Somersville, and many of the miners came from Wales. The principal shipping point was at a place called "New York in the Pacific." The miners called it "New York Landing" later, because of the coal it handled, it became known as "Black Diamond" - a name recalled by old-time Vallejoans. About 1910 the town was named Pittsburg.

The Norton Mine ceased about 1885; some of the others were operating as late as 1907. Today the towns have disappeared, the mines are forgotten. The low quality of coal, and the advent of gas, oil and electricity spelled the end of what was once the leading industry of Contra Costa.

The Vallejo Chronicle of 1868 carried the ads of local coal dealers specializing in

Cumberland and Black Diamond coal. These included E. M. Benjamin Co., Pennsylvania street wharf; Robert Hodgkinson and Co., Virginia street wharf; Thomas Martin, 164 Sonoma, and William Walker, 251 Georgia St.

OTHER 'OPPOSITE COAST' NEIGHBORS

Crockett is a new town, and embraces what was formerly Vallejo Junction and Valona. In 1866 a John Edwards and Joseph Bryant Crockett formed a partnership to operate 1,800 acres of the Rancho Canada del Hambro, which Crockett, an attorney, had acquired as a fee. In 1881 a townsite was laid out and Edwards named it in honor of Crockett, then Supreme Court Justice of California, in which office he served from 1868 to 1879.

Martinez bears the name of Don Ygnacio Martinez, former commandante of the S.F. Presidio. Legend has it that here the martini cocktail was first served.

Pacheco bears the name of one of the large Mexican grantees, and he was a political power in the early days. The town of Pacheco, a century ago, boasted of a tidewater channel to the bay and ocean sailing sloops came to its Main street. It was the site of a large flour mill.

Antioch is Biblical in origin, named by William W. Smith, a religious man and one of its founders. Danville is named for a town in Kentucky, the birthplace of one of its founders. San Pablo honors the name of Senor Castro, who owned the San Pablo Rancho; he lived in a spacious adobe hacienda near "El Cerrito," meaning "little hill." This is now known as Albany. Hill, so familiar to Solano motorists.

Pinole is perhaps the oldest site in our neighboring county. Don Pedro Fages and Padre Juan Crespi, diarist for Father Serra, came to this place and met the Indians who gave them food. Part of the food the Spaniards enjoyed was a meal made from acorns, seeds and wild grain, ground on stones, which they called "penole" (pee-no-lee).

THE LEAD SMELTER

Many Vallejoans work at the Selby smelter, and we are indebted to Mr. James Saunders, 1517 Rice St., for much information based on his career there. Thomas Selby first established a small plant on First and Howard streets, San Francisco, in 1850; moved in 1868 to the foot of Hyde street, bringing in Nevada ores. In 1883 he purchased the present property in Tormey and in 1885 the first blast furnaces were blown in. There have been two subsequent changes in ownership, and today the American Smelting and Refining Co. operates it. It is the only primary lead smelter situated on tidewater in the U.S.; gold, silver and other metals are by-products. This

plant refined the richest shipment of gold ore ever made in the history of gold mining. In 1907 the Mohawk Mine in Goldfield, Nev., received \$574,958 in payment of 48 tons of ore. The ore went 609 ounces of gold and 75 ounces of silver to the ton. The express charges for the ore from Goldfield was \$8,810.50.

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