

Days Of May 114 Years Ago

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Many things have occurred in Vallejo's 114 years of existence. Every day must be an anniversary of some event in our community life. One way to dip into the pages of the past is to recall earlier happenings in the merry month of May.

There are many really significant dates. For example, the first visit by a president of the United States—Teddy Roosevelt in 1903. President Rutherford B. Hayes came to Mare Island some 20 years earlier, but skipped our city. At 4 o'clock on the afternoon of May 14, 1903, the destroyer Paul Jones raced to Vallejo's Georgia Street wharf from San Francisco (and burned up her stacks) with President Roosevelt. Then followed a huge parade and finally, on Santa Clara Street between Georgia and York, Teddy laid the cornerstone of the Navy Y.M.C.A. and made a speech. He then went to the shipyard for a brief 20 minutes at Commandant Miller's home, and by six o'clock was back on board the PAUL JONES for the return to San Francisco. Mayor P. B. Lynch was master of ceremonies and presented Teddy with a souvenir trowel.

State Senator Luchsinger headed the reception committee; George Roe the publicity team; George Hanscom the arrangements committee; and the marshals of the parade were W. B. Pressey and O. S. Cooper. The Navy contingent was headed by RAdm M. Miller, Mare Island Commandant, and Captain Bowman H. McCalla, who became Commandant two years later.

The Vallejo Chronicle of May 15th congratulated Chief of Police Stanford and officers Scully, Williams, Shay, Gehrman and McEniry for their excellent security work during the parade. The Chronicle estimated that 10,000 people heard the President's talk on Santa Clara Street.

FIRST WIRELESS MESSAGE

Mare Island mechanics fashioned the first wireless stations and equipment on this coast. Besides the station on Mare Island hill they built one on Yerba Buena Island in the lower Bay, and one on the Farallons off the Golden Gate. (Later, they built an entire string of them from San Diego to the Pribilofs in the Bering Sea.) On May 21, 1904 the Yerba Buena station sent the first message to the U.S.S. SOLACE which was leaving for Manila. Communication was maintained for about 76 miles. When the SOLACE returned in August, the Mare Island hill station made the first contact.

Many other national and international events were making headlines in the Vallejo Chronicle in May 1904—the most important being the progress of the Russo-Japanese War, and it was during that May the Russians suffered the loss of their Pacific fleet. One Russian survivor, the Cruiser LENA, came across the Pacific and was interned at Mare Island for the duration of that conflict.

THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

At noon, May 9, 1869, the citizens of Vallejo were startled by the sudden firing of a 13-gun salute by the shipyard battery to celebrate the driving of the golden spike at Promontory Point, Utah, marking the completion of the overland mail route. San Francisco staged a gigantic celebration to mark the event. And the Vallejo Chronicle, on May 10th, carried an advertisement from the California Pacific and Union Pacific Roads for transcontinental travel. The one way fare from Sacramento (then the western terminus of the line) to New York was quoted at “\$139.50 in gold, or \$186 in currency, with 100 pounds of baggage allowed free, effective to-day.”

But other railway news was being published on the same day—May 8, 1869, by the Sutter Banner in Yuba City. It read: “When the Vallejo railroad is completed to Yuba City we shall have many advantages over Marysville. The immense stocks of grain, wood, etc., which heretofore necessarily passed over the toll bridge to Marysville and from there back again to the boat landing at the foot of our bridge, and then shipped to San Francisco, will find a ready market on our side of the Feather River. Hereafter they will be unloaded from the farmers’ wagons and shipped direct to Vallejo where a gigantic elevator is ready to receive it.”

FIRST ELECTRIC LIGHTS

The month of May, 1891, saw the first electric lights on Mare Island. The Chronicle of May 5, 1891 says: “The electrical light plant at Mare Island illuminated the yard and workshops for the first time last evening and the effect was striking. At 7:30 a number of invited guests visited the Yard and were shown the workings of the entire plant by Superintendent Curtis. Of the workshops, the saw mill is the best lighted, having four arc lights of 2,000 candle power. There are 30 such arc lights in the yard as a whole.”

It was on May 16, 1918, that the shipyard laid the keel of the Destroyer WARD and established a world’s record (which still stands) in launching it 161/2 days later on June 1st. Incidentally, the WARD fired the first shot, by either side, on the fateful morning of December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor, when it apprehended a 2-man enemy submarine.

And it was on May 5, 1857, that Commandant Farragut begin the construction of the first building at the Ammunition Depot on the lower end of the navy yard.

There are always earthquakes to report. On the 19th of May, 1892, the Evening Chronicle said: "A severe shock of earthquake was felt in this city at 3 a.m. Sunday morning. A number of our citizens enjoyed the sensation." And the same newspaper reported, on May 19th of 1902: "Old mother earth gave Vallejo two shakes early this morning. One was at 3:05 and the other at 10:30. The latter shock was severe and disarranged the goods in various stores, particularly in the Vallejo Rochdale Company's store on Virginia Street. The shake caused a great deal of excitement."

These are only a few of our May anniversaries!

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