

Memorial Days In Vallejo

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Decoration Day was made a fixed celebration on May 5, 1868, when Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan, of the Grand Army of the Republic, issued a general order designating May 30, 1868, "for the purpose of strewing with flowers the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country." Some 15 years later the G.A.R. asked that the name of this annual observance be changed to "Memorial Day," but here in 1964—about 80 years later—we still find many old timers calling it "Decoration Day."

Vallejo first observed the day in 1869; Mare Island's first ceremony at the cemetery was in 1871. The Vallejo Chronicle of May 18, 1869, announced: "Post 12, G.A.R., has received from headquarters an order issued by General Logan, Commander-in-Chief, designating Sunday, May 30, as the day whereupon members of the Army throughout the United States will decorate the graves of the soldiers who fell fighting for the Union, and also for their fellow-members who have since deceased."

On May 30 a large group of the G.A.R. members went aboard the steamer Lizzie, the Mare Island employes' ferry, to a wharf at the Ammunition Depot, and the Chronicle reports that "the graves of their comrades were wreathed in flowers, which were generously given by the people of Vallejo." Later in the day they proceeded on foot to the Vallejo cemetery on the Benicia Road (later identified as the Carquinez Cemetery) and left similar memorials to honor "the last resting places of those patriots who fell fighting for their country's existence." On May 30, 1871, Capt. C. H. Baldwin, USN, Mare Island Commandant, led the first observance at the cemetery on the south end of the island—a rite which has continued without a break to this very day.

VALLEJO REMEMBERS

The services in this city have continued for 95 years. For nearly half a century the G.A.R. conducted the May 30 programs; then for a brief spell the Lawton Camp of the U.S.W.V. did so; and since WWI the annual observances have been arranged by various groups of veterans' organizations or their auxiliaries. We checked some of the names of the leaders in this annual tribute. In the year 1878 the cemetery services were conducted by such pioneers as Stephen Finnell, James Blessington and George A. Buxton. The 30th anniversary, May 30, 1898, was one of Vallejo's largest as it followed the stirring events of the Spanish-American War.

A union church service was held in the early morning at the Methodist Church; then a parade was formed in front of the Samoset Hall (on Georgia St. where the Vallejo Merchants' Association office is now located), and marched to the cemetery. Two ceremonies were held, first by the Women's Relief Corps in unveiling a monument to the unknown dead of the Civil War, and later the G.A.R. service. The principal speaker was the Rev. W. L. Gaston; his son Orvin is still affiliated with the Gibson Publications. At the Auxiliary ceremony a large number of very young school children took part in a memorial pageant. Our readers will quickly recognize some of the names of children who participated: Hazel Denio, Violet Weniger, Archie MacDonell, Willie Stevens, Ella Penland, George Bade, James Emerson, Norman Mangold, Ina and Howard Gerrish, Bonnie and Regina Newcomb, Eva Bryant and Russell Fitzgerald.

The nature of the M a y 30 programs gradually changed to an afternoon gathering at the City Park on Louisiana Street, particularly throughout the 1920s and early 30s. Many familiar names are associated with these Park services. Jules Weyand and his band were frequently on hand; Mayor James Roney invariably was assigned the role of reading Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In the 1926 program Russell F. O'Hara Sr., an early Commander of the U.V.R. Post, was chairman; in the following year Sheriff John R. Thornton was in charge, with Louis N. Pechette as Grand Marshal of the parade.

MEMORIAL SYCAMORE TREES

Most Vallejoans are unaware of who planted the sycamores on Fifth Street, south toward the bridge, or why they are there. I'm certain that none of the residents of the 1000, 1100 and 1200 block of Fifth Street know of the significance of the sycamores in their front yards. In the spring of 1926, when the writer was Commander of Vallejo Post 104 of the American Legion, with the help of Past Commander Dr. John W. Green and the 1927 Commander, Louis N. Pechette, the Legionnaires decided to plant a "memorial lane" honoring Vallejo's WWI dead. Some 50 sycamores were furnished by the state; Legionnaires Thomas J. Horan, John Dias, Leonard A. Strong and others headed the planting committee; Supervisor Fred Birchmore assured irrigation for the first two years. Twenty-nine trees remain today in this memorial lane—some badly neglected. Of course, Fifth Street, then part of the Lincoln Highway (U.S. 40), is no longer a principal route.

MARE ISLAND CEMETERY

This is one of the oldest military cemeteries in California—the Benicia Arsenal is one of the older locations. The first interment was the body of Quartermaster George A. David of the USS Massachusetts on Feb. 12, 1856. The total number of graves is about 990, although only 950 or so bear markers. In addition to American sailors and Marines, the bodies of sailors of seven other nationalities lie here. Many well-known Mare Island

officers and their wives have their final resting place in this beautiful hillside cemetery including the McDougals, Ellicotts, McAlisters. Here, also, is the grave of Anna Key Turner, daughter of Francis Scott Key, author of our National Anthem. The Mare Island observances on Memorial Day are always impressive—they are open to the public and more should plan to attend.

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