

Old Rocks, Other Items

By Ernest D. Wichels

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No one thinks of Vallejo as a former “mining town” and most of Solano County’s residents will probably say that the only “mineral” in the county is the natural gas produced in the southern and eastern sections.

The upcoming convention of the California Federation of Mineral and Gem Societies, scheduled for the Solano Fair Grounds July 17 to 19th, focuses our attention on the large deposits of cinnabar next to our city. Cinnabar is the rock which yields mercury, or quicksilver. Hundreds of Vallejo gardens are decorated with this ore, obtained from Hunter’s Hill, Blue Rock Springs, and other nearby areas.

The St. John’s Quicksilver Mine operated on Hunter’s Hill for more than 40 years, and between 1876 and 1918 produced about 11,000 flasks of the liquid element. Some activity was renewed about six years ago when a mining company sought to uncover the mercury “lost” in the immediate ground area because of inefficient processes used in earlier years.

Today only traces of the foundations of the mine buildings remain, and the large tunnels have been boarded up because of the hazards to children and casual hikers. St. John’s is located on the 712-acre ranch of Antone Azevedo. One of the field trips scheduled by the delegates to this week’s Silver Jubilee of the California Gem enthusiasts will be to the Azevedo ranch.

It is estimated that Northern California mines have, since 1850, produced more than half a million ‘flasks of mercury. One-time large producers include the Oat Hill Mine near Aetna Springs in Napa County, and the Mirabel Mine between Calistoga and Middletown, on the north slope of Mt. Helena. The Mirabel has for years been owned or controlled by Vallejoans.

FOURTH OF JULY

The ambitious program provided for the entertainment of our citizens this past week reminds us of similar events in past years. More will be written in future columns, but the Fourth has always been a big day in Vallejo. The Vallejo Chronicle of July 5, 1890 reports in detail the “races” held by Vallejo’s hose and engine companies. Races means competition in getting to the scene of an alarm and turning on the water—or whatever it was they had to do. Some of the companies were the Neptunes, the San

Pablo, the Hartford, the Phoenix and the Vallejo Hook and Ladder.

Substantial bets were made on this annual. "race," the highlight of every Fourth program during the 80's and 90's. Billy Blake is noted as the perennial drum major for the band in these parades, the Vallejo Chronicle describing him as "impressive with his flowing plumes and golden wand." We were particularly intrigued by the Chronicle's annual Fourth of July stories telling of the three Vallejo breweries, each of which always had a "keg" wagon in the parade, dispensing samples generously.

One of the annual features was the baseball game between Vallejo and Napa. The Chronicle sports editor of 1894 complained that when Vallejo went to Napa to play, the navy city team and its followers "ate and drank Napa dry," but when Napa came to Vallejo, they packed their lunches.

EARLY AMBITIONS

Early newspaper copies are always interesting. Our Historical Society historian, Wood Young of Suisun Valley, furnishes some clippings of 60 years ago, involving a well-known Vallejo figure—at that time the developer of Vallejo Heights—of whom we spoke several weeks ago. Here is the Benicia New Era of Nov. 8, 1902, reporting the Board of Supervisors' meeting: "A petition was received from J. W. Hartzell for a franchise for an electric road along a certain described route in Suisun, Green Valley, Vacaville and Silveyville townships. The clerk was directed to give notice that bids for said franchise will be received up to Jan. 2, 1903."

On Jan. 8, 1903, the Solano County Courier reported: "This being the time appointed for opening bids for the sale of a certain franchise to build and operate an electric railroad along certain roads in this county, the Clerk reported that but one bid—that of J. W. Hartzell offering \$5 for said franchise. On motion of Supervisor Fleming the bid was ordered accepted."

The road wasn't even begun—but we don't have that story.

The Courier, in January 1902, also reported: "Drilling has been resumed in the Vacaville oil well. A depth of 1,360 feet has been reached and the drillers think that within an additional hundred feet they will strike oil. The company is prepared to bore to 2,000 feet if necessary." Well, as we all know, there is as yet no oil producer in Vacaville.

This leads us to another oil prospect—just exactly 50 years ago—right here in Vallejo. It created a great deal of interest for several years, but no oil. The drilling proceeded on the ranch of William Hauhuth, located then just south of the Garibaldi property in the

1700 block of Broadway, and approximately across the street from the Solano Meat Company.

This venture had all Vallejo hoping for success, since "black gold" was just coming into its own in the United States. One of the Hauhuth daughters is Mrs. James G. McPherson, 1600 Illinois St., and there are two Hauhuth grandsons residing here Phillip H. Berg-wall of 100 Rincon Way, and attorney William H: McPherson, 139 Toyon Drive.

So, Solanoans stopped mining quicksilver because of the prohibitive cost of production, and stopped drilling for oil because, apparently, there isn't any here.

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