

Messengers Of 1912-1914

By Ernest D. Wichels

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This community and this county are saddened by the passing, last week, of Harry V. Soanes—a leading business, civic and philanthropic leader and a citizen who truly helped to spark the progress of Vallejo during the present generation.

His untimely passing brings to mind his earlier popularity and leadership as a member of Mare Island's messenger class of 1912-1914. Half a century has passed since these messenger boys served the local shipyard, but the legendary stories of their pranks and activities seem to have multiplied with the years. The group was known as either the Messenger "Force" or the Messenger "Lobby"—but both terms aptly signify the politics they played or were accused of playing. Leadership changed with the changing faces in 1912-1914, but during Harry "Dooley" Soanes' incumbency there was no question that this dynamic personality, with his exuberance and enthusiasm, was "No 1 messenger boy."

The messengers of that era were more than an integral part of a great navy yard. They permeated every activity in it. They were the original "grape-vine." In those days before the advent of female secretaries and women's cloak rooms, these boys were the agency through which all news (and gossip) passed.

They were horticulturists—they knew the exact ripening days of the cherries, plums, apricots and peaches in the backyards of officers' row, and were usually responsible for harvesting much of the crop. They were avid sportsmen and when the U.S. Marines played their regular Wednesday and Saturday afternoon baseball games, it was merely a coincidence that every messenger had a package or letter to deliver to the Marine Barracks.

Whether the Lobby had boys available for service at any given time was always a true barometer of the state of the weather outdoors. Naval Constructor Ruhm once referred to them as the "cavalry on bicycles."

WHO WERE THEY?

Most of these boys, like "Dooley" Soanes, graduated into successful community or shipyard careers. Perhaps some of our readers will recognize the names of the 1912-1914 Messenger Force: Albert W. "Jitney" Spencer, Raymond Rath, Lester F. "Pat" O'Hara Frank "Vince" Murphy, Milford J. "Chick" Brinkerhoff, Reuben Silver,

George "Hook" Sullivan, Roy A. Weir, Otis J. Hunt, Lester C. "Swede" Swanson, Lloyd H. "Farmer" Hoffman, Raleigh Richards, O t t o E. Rosenbaum, Burson Shippee, Fayette Congrave. The supervisor was Robert Emmett "Bob" Mahony. Your columnist is proud to have been a member of this group during all three of these years.

"Dooley" Soanes, both during his messenger service and in his community life, contributed to and helped to sustain the esprit d' corps which is and always has been a Mare Island trademark. The survivors of the Class of 1914 salute an esteemed co-worker, and revere the memory of one who made and left an indelible mark on the Mare Island tradition a half century ago.

FRATERNAL ORDERS

It has often been said, over the years, that Vallejo had a greater number of fraternal societies than any other city of its size. The latest city directory lists upwards of a hundred of them. But in our research in earlier editions of the Vallejo papers we found one which intrigued our imagination and wonder why it disappeared. From the Chronicle of April 9, 1900: "Vallejo Roost No. 1, Order of Mystic Owls, tendered to Christian Joy Peoples, recently appointed Assistant Paymaster in the Navy, a banquet in Rowland's Restaurant.

Henry J. Widenmann presided as toastmaster, and toasts were offered by George A. Roney and F. B. Winchell. Other Owls in attendance included J. J. Luchsinger, R. K. Cutler, George A. Brew, R. A. Brownlie, R. H. Finnell, D. E. Tripp, Merritt F. Winchell and George F. Kutz." Apparently Owls no longer roost in Vallejo.

KENO AND BINGO

Some Vallejoans think that the ban on Keno and Bingo is of recent development, and look back on "the good old days" when we had an "open town." Don't you believe it! Here is a Vallejo Chronicle story of March 30, 1900: "J. T. Murphy, proprietor of the Waldorf, was found guilty in Justice Brown's court yesterday afternoon of the offense of owning and managing a Keno game in violation of city ordinance. City Attorney Harrier appeared for the people and attorney J. T. Ryan for the defendant." What was most significant, however, was the unusual jury panel.

The 12 men represented the leading business and professional men in the downtown district, and it took them less than half an hour to bring in a verdict of "guilty." The names are familiar to most readers: Robert Brownlie, John Wilson, L. K. Talley, C. L. McPike, John E. Colthurst, James Power, M. G. Winchell, George Monroe, R. Kruger, Charles Ratto, James MacDonald, P. R. Walsh.

But gambling cases were not rare in Vallejo. The Chronicle of Dec. 11, 1868, reported: "A bet on the result of last month's election between John O'Connell and Thomas Haggerty will be the issue in Judge Lawton's court tomorrow. After the election, the stakeholder (J. L. Likins, express agent) delivered the stakes, \$100, to the winner, O'Donnell. The loser now brings action against the holder of the bet for recovery of the money." The next day's paper reported that the stake-holder lost the suit, but doesn't say why. The editor merely comments that election bets don't belong in the courts.

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