

The White Sulphur Spring

By Ernest D. Wichels

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The “day camps” at our Blue Rock Springs recreation spot now become a memory with the opening of another school semester. Some 60 years ago this time of the year marked the end of the “summer camp” for scores of Vallejo families.

A half-century ago, and earlier, Vallejo’s White Sulphur Springs was the center of this city’s recreational life. Many local families moved to the campgrounds under the trees at the Springs at the close of school in June. The breadwinners would “commute” to and from their work in Vallejo or Mare Island. For years this was via the late Manuel Madrid’s four-horse stage. Later Manager Madrid bought one of the early four-cylinder automobiles to augment his stage service, but most Vallejoans preferred the horse-drawn vehicle because of its greater dependability. These vacationing families were served with food necessities by wagon delivery. Some of these were Rowland’s Bakery, Samuel Brown’s Meat Market, and John S. McDonald’s Grocery (McDonald was the grandfather of former Mayor George Demmon).

These purveyors took orders one day and made deliveries the next.

Among the families who, in the early 1900’s, spent the summers at the Springs, were the D. B. Browns, Thomas B. Dicks, S. M. Levees, William Gees, Merritt Winchells, Sr.; Will Greens, Gedges, Clauses, Prachts, Longfellows, and the O. S. Coopers. There was a bachelors’ building, too—and the occupants included Vallejo’s male eligibles of that era: Douglass and Don Fraser, George Shepstone, Archie MacDonell, Frank Shea, Frank Lee, etc.

Sunday School picnics were invariably held at the Springs. So were the Hermann Sons’ picnics, always a Vallejo highlight. The Fourths of July featured a parade, entertainment and a swimming party in the lake—then Vallejo’s only swimming pool! Manager Madrid operated an outdoor dance floor. There were eight bathhouses for those who wanted the “curative” effect of the mineral water. The excellence of the meals served by the Madrids in their dining room was widely known. The Springs also had a short popularity as a training spot for boxers—both Tom Sharkey and Bob Fitzsimmons, world champions, took training here. The beautiful rose garden was always a delight.

IN THE BEGINNING

One of the early descriptions is taken from the Vallejo Chronicle of May 15, 1869: "The White Sulphur Springs bid fair to become one of the most popular and attractive suburban retreats in California. A month ago General Frisbie became the proprietor and has made many improvements. The hotel building, embowered with roses and climbers, and shaded by trees of many years' growth, has been completely renovated. Three elegant and commodious cottages, containing five spacious rooms each, have been erected. A large two-story building has been put up at some distance from the other structures and is designed solely for amusement and recreation. The lower floor has been fitted up with a bar, billiard room and barber shop. The second story has been designed as a dance floor; next season this building will be enlarged to include a bowling alley and shooting gallery."

Later this "amusement" building was altered to become the bachelors' quarters.

The Manuel Madrids operated the Springs from about 1902 to 1926. Mrs. Joseph Ryan, 918 Louisiana St., the former Carmelita Madrid, a daughter, knows much of the last half-century of activity there because of her intimate associations. It was the Madrids who changed the name from White Sulphur Springs to Blue Rock Springs, because of the color of the rock around the mineral springs. It was not until World War II, however, that Vallejo changed the name of "Sulphur Springs Road" to its present title.

The main structure at the resort in early days is described as follows: "It is two stories in height and surrounded on three sides by a verandah. A wide flight of steps is flanked on either side by well laid parterres of flowers leading to the piazza. The dining room is capable of accommodating 150 guests, while adjoining it are spacious and well furnished sitting parlors. The upper floor is devoted entirely to bed chambers, of which there are 16 of various sizes."

PURCHASE BY THE CITY

The advent of the automobile contributed to the decline of the Springs, because other attraction's were made available. The water supply diminished because of a tunnel dug on the opposite side of the hill; trees died, buildings were torn down. On Dec. 13, 1937 the City of Vallejo purchased the 160 acres for \$20,000—a bargain at today's real estate prices. Purchase was from Justin and Agnes McDonald. The then Recreation Commission began the planting of additional trees, erecting a water reservoir, rest rooms, barbecue pits and picnic facilities. Several years later the Municipal Golf Course moved from its location atop the Vista de Vallejo subdivision to the Springs.

Much is being done to bring Blue Rock Springs back to its earlier glory and popularity, and the Greater Vallejo Recreation District has long-range plans to accomplish this dream. Public interest has changed and we know the facilities planned for the future

would seem strange to the Vallejoan who lived 100 years ago. As the editor of May 15, 1869 (Chronicle) continued: "Foundations have been laid for a large stable to accommodate twenty animals and the fine stock of guests. A 45-foot-square floor has been prepared for the votaries of terpsichore, and a new bar, billiard and sitting room erected where gents can amuse themselves quietly. Next year shall see these Springs dispute supremacy with the Calistogas and Jackson's Napa Soda Springs as a summer watering place."

Certainly the Springs have been a part of Vallejo living since the beginning of our city and it is appropriate that this property now belongs to its citizens, with a commission and a golf club determined to improve it.

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