

Changing Fashions

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Newcomers, and the younger generation, are not as conscious of the changing fashions of living in this area as are the oldtimers or those who pore through Solano County's historical past. We are all aware of the new bodies on automobiles and the gadgets which add considerably to the cost of a car.

Likewise, we all know that hemlines on ladies' dresses are up, and most of us have heard, at least, that there may be something new in swim suit fashions. But let's go back for a moment to the days when ladies' swimsuits were knee-length and required a skirt. Not too far back—just 1913-14. Two weeks ago we wrote, in this column, about the Mare Island messenger boy class of 1913-14-15, and their escapades. The anniversary of the birth of the Mare Island cafeteria—Sept. 20, 1913—involves the messengers and the fashions of eating.

The messenger boys were hired, during the lunch hour, to serve the food, pour the coffee, clean the tables, etc., and then "bolt" their own meals. There wasn't any pay—the boys simply worked for their meal, and sometimes gave the impression they were being overpaid. Forbes Brown, the chairman of the cafeteria committee, actually accused their appetites as being responsible for the losses suffered in the first month's operation. Your columnist was one of the messenger-servers; also, the cafeteria's first bookkeeper. The "beanery" was located where the Central Cafeteria now operates—kitchen, dining room, storerooms, etc., all on the first floor. The chef and manager, Mr. Diefenbach—who in later years operated a delicatessen where the PG&E office is now located on Virginia Street, lived upstairs in an apartment with his family.

DAILY MENUS

During the first year or two of operation the meals were served to Mare Island employees in family style-25 cents a person, unless you wished a fancy dessert like pie, which would cost a nickel extra. There was one meat entree daily, potatoes (usually boiled, with jackets), bread and butter, soup, coffee, and a dessert which would be bread or rice pudding, or canned or stewed fruit. Here are some of the oddities in the 1913-14 menu that the present generation may find it difficult to understand. Take coffee. The messenger boys served it from large gallon pitchers. The cream was always added to the pitchers. There might be one, possibly two, customers who preferred black coffee—the boys would bring them a cup of coffee directly from the urn. If there were three "black coffee" drinkers at one lunch serving, it constituted a record.

There were no salads. Today's working force at Mare Island are gourmet specialists when it comes to salads—both as to variety and quality. Fifty years ago, if Chef Diefenbach placed 50 salads on the tables prior to lunch, there would be 50 untouched salads at the end of the meal. One of the early arguments was between committeemen Andy Gilmore and Guy Hale over the serving of green vegetables. Gilmore said it was useless; Hale maintained it was necessary for a "balanced diet." Gilmore was right from a practical point of view—the men simply didn't want anything but soup, meat, potatoes and gravy (plenty of gravy), bread, a good dessert and coffee. Another change has taken place—the chef could serve lamb at least twice a week as the one meat entree, and it would completely disappear from the platters.

Today's cafeteria operators—or any Vallejo restaurateur—would find difficulties if lamb were the only meat entree on the menu. While pie was an option, the Mare Island mechanic disdained cake. Milk was not served. Ice cream was unknown, largely because of lack of refrigeration.

CAFETERIA BIG BUSINESS

Mare Island's first feeding "operation" began some 60 years ago in the second floor of the shipyard fire house, where the wife of Fire Chief O'Hara (mother of George and Russell O'Hara, Alma Creedon, Ruth Loring) served lunch for perhaps a score of workmen. The cafeteria system reached its peak during WWII when, with three dining rooms, five canteens, seven mobile units serving hot food, its own ice cream factory, bake shop, etc., operating 24 hours a day, it grossed as high as four million dollars a year. There were many energetic Mare Islanders who performed the extracurricular job of operating the cafeteria these past 50 years. Outstanding were James Forbush and Frank "Mickey" Macahiel; and such managers as Fred Bonn, Russ Kramer and, today, Frank Patmon.

This brings us back to the messengers of 50 years ago. The early cafeteria did not have facilities for candy, chewing gum, tobaccos, etc. In fact, there wasn't any such facility in all Mare Island except for the military post exchanges.

There were one or two clandestine "merchants" in the shops. One, especially, in the Electric Shop which operated through the "understanding" of Master Barstow, Supervisors Jones, Simons and others. The messengers were the purveyors, or distributors, also operating clandestinely. Habits have changed here, too; the major items were Bull Durham and cigarette papers; snuff; and Star chewing tobacco.

BOBBED HAIR

Then came WWI and the advent of messenger "girls." The big news was early in 1920

when one of the girls showed with Mare Island's first bobbed haircut. The male supervisor (a retired Army corporal) did all but discharge her; a Vallejo evening newspaper published the event on its first page. The supervisor snorted: "A man's haircut! Next thing we know they'll be wearing trousers!" Well—but, remember, this WAS 1920!

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