

Early Media

By Ernest D. Wichels

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It is difficult for most of us, living in the year 1964, to realize the advantages we possess over those available to Vallejo residents or Mare Island personnel just a hundred years ago. We take our freeways, radio and TV, dial telephones with direct connections to New York or Hawaii, automobiles, airplanes, etc., for granted.

Our Vallejo and Mare Island pioneers were mighty appreciative of improvements in communications—so much so that it usually meant a holiday when a new step was completed.

The spring of 1860 saw the Atlantic and Pacific coasts pulled a little closer together—it should have brought the navy yard and the Navy Department closer, at least. The Pony Express commenced carrying mail from St. Louis to California. As Arnie Lott reports in his “Long Line of Ships,” Mare Island watchers late on the night of April 13, 1860, stood at the south end of the island to observe the Sacramento stern-wheel steamer on her way to San Francisco with the first mail brought by horse and rider from the East. But economy in Captain Cunningham’s days was as important as it is today to Rear Admiral Fahy’s regime, and there is record of only one letter leaving Mare Island. The rate was \$2.50 a half-ounce—at a time when flour sold for a dollar a sack, and daily wages averaged \$1.50.

CABLE AND TELEGRAPH

On Sept. 27, 1858, the Mare Island authorities declared a holiday for its 300 employees and service personnel to mark the completion of the Atlantic cable. We fail to understand what an Atlantic cable had to do with local communications, but the event was at least of international significance. On Oct. 24, 1861 the first telegraph line between the Atlantic and Pacific was completed. Theoretically it became possible to flash a message from Mare Island to the Navy Department in an hour, which it formerly took the Pony Express to get the word from one remount station to the next. In actual practice, the trip from the telegraph office to the Navy offices sometimes took longer than the steamer trip via Panama—for instance, Lott in his book reports that a telegram sent from Washington Sept. 5, 1864 reporting Farragut’s victory at Mobile Bay, reached Mare Island on October 10. The price was 50 cents a word so, like the Pony Express, Navy economy ruled that the telegraph would be used “only in case of absolute necessity.”

Vallejo's first telegraph line was built between here and Benicia about 1857 by a Mr. Gamble, and some months later;; W. W. Hanscom laid; a cable across the channel to connect with it. But since Mare Island had little in common with the Army in Benicia Arsenal, this line too, went largely unused. The first telephone placed in operation on Mare Island was on Feb. 10, 1881.

RAILROAD CONNECTIONS

Another Mare Island holiday was declared on May 8, 1869 to help celebrate the driving of the golden spike at Promontory, Utah, which completed the transcontinental railroad. Mare Island guns shot a 13-gun salute. The Vallejo Chronicle tells of a civic celebration, on the evening of May 8.

Until July 3, 1919, every pound of provisions, steel, and other material brought to the local shipyard by rail from the East, had to be loaded on barges and towed to Mare Island. During WW 1 this was modified somewhat, and car ferries were used by the Southern Pacific to haul the freight cars to a slip located near Pier 19 across the channel. There was a parade, complete with dignitaries, ribbon-cutting, etc., on July 3, 1919, when the first locomotive of the S. F. Napa and Calistoga Railroad crossed the old shipyard causeway, with Captain Edward L. Beach, USN, commandant, as "honorary engineer."

Mare Island's first wireless message was sent on May 21, 1904, and it is a tribute to so many of our city's sons that the establishment of wireless (now radio) on the Pacific Slope, Alaska and Hawaii was their handiwork.

We shouldn't conclude this short article on old-time communications without mentioning the legend (probably accurate) that the engine-driven generator which furnished power for Mare Island's first wireless station, on golf club hill, in 1904, was housed in a former pigeon-cote. The shipyard, for a time, had carrier pigeons for communication with Yerba Buena Island.

THE CALISTOGA FIRE

Calistoga's tragic fire ten days ago tempts us to give a brief description of this pioneer city, gateway to Lake County resorts. Early in 1840's the Rancho Cayne Humena was granted by the Mexicans to Dr. E. T. Bale. Bale built the historic Bale Mill; shortly after settling there he married General Vallejo's niece. In 1845 John York built a log cabin at the upper end of the grant. Also, in 1845 the Hudson, Elliott and Fowler families came. The Kelseys (part of the Bidwell Party that crossed the plains in 1841) were there. Then came the Hargrave and Dewell families; Dewell laid out the present townsite. Later the Cyrus, Barnett, Musgrove and Kilburn families arrived. Sam Brannan, California's first

millionaire, arrived in 1859.

The story of his Mormon leadership, banking and newspaper interests, grocer and furniture dealer, and other activities are a story in themselves. He proceeded to make Calistoga a second Saratoga (N.Y.) spa; spent a million or more building resorts, race tracks, etc. He is credited with naming the town ("Cali" for California and "stoga" for Saratoga) although some historians claim it is a combination of two Spanish words: "caliente" and "toga"; caliente meaning hot (for the springs), and toga meaning cloak. This combination was supposed to signify a person's feelings when taking a hot mud bath for the first time. Calistoga became the terminus for the first railroad out of Vallejo in 1868.

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