

History Repeats

By Ernest D. Wichels

Sunday, November 29, 1964

Anniversaries do have a habit of repeating themselves. Last Tuesday's Chronicle featured an illustrated story of the demolition of the slip of the Mare Island Ferry Co. at the foot of Georgia Street. Since the days of Farragut (1854) this area has been the departure point of passengers bound for the naval shipyard.

It has seen rowboats traveling morning and evening (with the workers walking up Georgia or Virginia with the oars over their shoulders); many naval ferries including the Pinafore, Dart, Leslie and the Nellie; the side-wheelers Ellen, Vallejo and City of Seattle; and a dozen or more launches beginning with the Success and Progress back in 1914.

But the demolition of the ferry slip, which began on the 20th of this month, is the second time this was attempted.

The first try was unintentional, but it took out half of the north side of the slip.

Strangely enough, it also happened on the 20th of November—this time in 1919.

FIRST HAND VIEW

Your columnist was a "passenger" on board the battleship CALIFORNIA when it was launched that day. Governor Wm. D. Stephens of California was the speaker; his daughter, Mrs. Barbara Zane (for whose husband the Mare Island built destroyer ZANE was named) broke the traditional bottle of champagne.

The novel launching arresting gear had been tried with a model of the battleship, in a tank, with no difficulties. Naval Constructor Harold Saunders was certain it would work, but the result was a little different. The CALIFORNIA stirred herself, slid down the ways, entered the water with a dignified splash—and kept right on going toward the Vallejo ferry slip. She came to a splintering stop, took out 25 feet of the slip, created a wave that swamped a dozen small boats, and sprayed those spectators that had not already taken to their heels, up Georgia Street.

There was no damage to the CALIFORNIA, and half a dozen tugs soon had her afloat. For those on board the dreadnaught, your columnist can say from personal knowledge, that it was a smooth, uneventful voyage of some 2,000 feet.

Adjoining this column is a reproduction, from a post card, of the CALIFORNIA attempting to come up Georgia Street.

FUTURE OF SHIPYARDS

With the recent decision on closing of certain military establishments, we note that tomorrow—Nov. 30th, is the anniversary of Mare Island's disestablishment as a "Navy Yard" in 1945, and the creation of the San Francisco Naval Base, with the Naval Shipyard as a component. VAdm. M. S. Tisdale, USN (ret.), now representing Vallejo and Solano County in Washington, D.C., was the last Commandant of the "Navy Yard" and the first Commander of the "Naval Base."

But commissions and committees have investigated the need for retention of naval shipyards for many years. Some of the present generation remember the crisis in 1919 to 1923 when an effort was made to move the local plant to Alameda or elsewhere. Dr. James J. Hogan, then Vallejo's representative in Washington, ably seconded by C. C. Hart, editor of the Sacramento Bee, and later by Capt. Leonard M. Cox (CEC) USN (later still an editor of the Vallejo Chronicle), successfully presented the Mare Island case.

An earlier commission on navy yards, at the direction of the U. S. Senate, submitted a report on Dec. 1, 1883. Its recommendations are of interest today—81 years later.

The commission notes that changes in warfare have changed values of navy yards. "What was a very good site in the wooden age of shipbuilding is not necessarily a good site in the steel age." Also, "A site that was far beyond the reach of the smooth bore gun may be within easy range of the ten-inch rifle." And, "waters difficult to navigate under sail may present no obstacle to the modern steamer."

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Excerpts from the report are given. For Portsmouth, N. H., "Your commissioners do not recommend the sale of this yard, as it will always be useful as a sanitary station." For Boston: "Its geographical position, excellent plant, and adaptability give it too much value to be relinquished." For New York: "The sale of this yard is not recommended." League Island (Philadelphia) : "Of all the places on the Atlantic seaboard the Delaware is the best for iron-shipbuilding, and the necessity has long been recognized that the government should possess the means of building its own ships."

Washington (D.C.) Navy Yard: "It is wholly unsuited for a shipbuilding or repair yard; its very valuable plant admirably adapts it for special objects under the Bureaus." Norfolk: "Though deficient in important particulars, the advantages it unquestionably possesses

far outweigh its deficiencies.” Pensacola, Fla.: “Its nearness to the sea (makes it) wholly untenable.”

MARE ISLAND NAVY YARD

The briefest recommendation of all covered Mare Island. The complete statement: “Your commissioners recommend the retention of this yard. As it is the only one on the Pacific Coast, and fulfills most of the requirements of a perfect site, they do not consider the question of its sale open to question.”

We congratulate the men and women of Mare Island, for providing the most essential requirement of today—quality unquestioned, consistent with economy and timeliness.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/765>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/765/>