

We're Losing The Bay

By Ernest D. Wichels

Sunday, April 11, 1965

In 1883 the Congress passed the Anti-Debris Act, which was meant to curb the damage wrought by hydraulic mining. In California it was commonly called placer mining. But it was not until Judge Lorenzo rendered his famous decision on Jan. 9, 1884, that hydraulic mining practically ceased in the Sierra Nevada.

The Sawyer decision stated that the practice of allowing hydraulic debris (mud, trees, rocks and shrubbery) to wash downstream into rivers and over the rich farm lands of the valley must stop. But this is like closing the barn-door after the horse is stolen.

The damage was done. For more than 15 years the mountains were literally washed down into our valleys and bays. The big "wash" was San Juan Ridge, near the towns of North San Juan, Camptonville, North Columbia, etc. But large hydraulic operations also took place at Gold Run and Dutch Flat, near U. S. 40 (Interstate 80).

IN OUR BACK YARD

What has all this to do with Vallejo? Or Solano county? In the first place, a great deal of the Sierra Nevada foothills now fills our local straits, San Pablo Bay, the channels in upper Solano County, and everywhere in Central California. It even defies dredging. The mud seemingly won't sink-just keeps on floating back even when taken elsewhere. It is called "colloidal" mud. It is best described by saying that each little particle of mud has a Mae West lifejacket around it.

For the benefit of some readers, hydraulic mining is described by Harry Wells in "A History of Nevada county" (Thompson and West, 1880) as "washing down the auriferous hills of the gravel range by directing a powerful stream of water against the bank, the dirt and rocks being carried by the water through a deep cut or tunnel in which is set a system of flumes or sluices for catching the gold, being finally discharged into some ravine or canyon and denominated "tailings".

OUR LOCAL BAY DISAPPEARING

Much of these tailings has piled up in San Pablo Bay. The 1851 Geodetic Survey map of San Pablo Bay, used by Commodore Sloat when he surveyed this area and selected Mare Island as the site of a navy yard, showed an average depth of water off the shore west of the Marine Barracks as 17 feet.

The depth this week, at low tide, a mile west, of the Mare Island shore, is 3 feet!

When the Sears Point Toll Road was built about 1928, the San Pablo Bay waters lapped the southern bank of the highway. Today the waterline is nearly a half mile to the south.

When Vallejo was built about, 1850, the bay waters came as far as Lemon Street (where the present flood control basin is located). It filled in so rapidly that in 1914 the city built a bulkhead along the entire waterfront and pumped in the mud to form new land.

Many present day residents still remember that the short-cut for pedestrians between North and South Vallejo was over the Southern Pacific trestle; the only other way was to go out Benicia Road to Lemon Street and thence westerly to South Vallejo.

SOLANO'S SHIPPING PORTS

During the 1850s and 1860s, most of San Francisco's fruits and vegetables came from Green and Suisun Valleys-all of it was shipped by water from the main street of either Suisun or Cordelia! All of Suisun's wheat left that town by boat. Until late in the last century, much of the coal burned in upper Solano County came from the Mt. Diablo Mines (Cumberland, Somerville, Nortonville, Black Diamond) by boat to the Suisun docks.

Maine Prairie, one of upper Solano County's ghost towns near Cache Slough (Vallejo's principal water source today), had a shipbuilding industry in 1870 where wheat schooners were built.

Another indication of the former depth of water in the county's inland channels is to report that a good portion of the 100 miles of San Francisco's streets and alleys (in 1850 and 1860) were paved with cobblestones which were quarried in the hills around Cordelia and shipped, by boat, from that town's main street!

The Contra Costa Gazette, Martinez, several years ago told of ocean-going sloops loading flour at the mill in the town of Pacheco, south of Martinez in 1865. That slough is filled up and presently, is part of that region's flooding problem.

EVEN NAPA RIVER AFFECTED

Today there is a great clamor about the many projects intended to reclaim various parts of San Francisco Bay and its tributaries. Man, it seems, has already made mistakes but is determined to continue to drive the waters back into the Pacific.

In early days there was considerable passenger service between Napa and Vallejo by steamer. In the 1860s two steamers made daily trips. On March 21, 1869, the large "Empire City" began making three round trips weekly. During the 1870s the steamer "Washington" ran three times weekly between S. F., Vallejo and Napa, with a stop at Solsol-fare 50c.

No dredging was required until about 1890. Now, in order to keep the river navigable, periodic dredging is needed.

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