**Paddles To Polaris**

By Ernest D. Wichels

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We, all Solano County citizens, live on an arm of one of the greatest harbors in the world! Navigable waters bound two sides of our county. And yet we find that the average Solano an seems only dimly aware of our county’s heritage in waterborne traffic, and its past and present reliance on water “highways.”

Yes, we are “water-minded” with our several county marinas, our yacht clubs, and, it is said, Solano County people possess the largest “fleet” on Lake Berryessa. We take for granted the hundreds of naval vessels which annually ply to the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, and the tens of thousands which have done so since 1854.

The real oldtimers remember the rowboats which helped to transport workmen between Vallejo and the island. And some not so old remember that the only route to San Francisco was via Southern Pacific or Monticello ferries.

In the 1850s and 1860s there was multiple daily service by stern-wheelers beltween San Francisco and Sacramento, with regular stops at Benicia, Collinsville and Rio Vista. And similar service to Napa, with regular stops at the Virginia street wharf.

How many readers realize that, today, ocean-going freighters bearing the nags of many nations traverse Solano County waters enroute to the new inland port of Sacramento?

Then, of course, we could add General Vallejo’s capsized raft, in 1840, with its white mare; or Lt. Felix Ayala’s visit to and naming of our island in August of 1775.

**THE EARLY BOATS**

As early as 1879 a train ferry (Solano), then largest in the world, began carrying the trains from Benicia to Port Costa. The larger Contra Costa took over in 1914, and both were retired on Nov. 30, 1930, when the first train crossed the straits on the Martinez-Benicia railway bridge.

From the railroad terminus in South Vallejo there were many sidewheelers which carried mail and passengers to Vallejo Junction (now part of Crockett). The Amelia belgan in the 1870s; then the Julia which ran between 1882 until it blew up in South Vallejo on Feb. 27, 1888. Then came the sidewheelers Amador and then, in 1904, oldtimers remember the El Capitan, Bay City and Garden City. The latter boats also
stopped at the Georgia street wharf.

THE ADEN BROTHERS

In the 1870s the Aden brothers (Martin R., John R., and R. J.R.) went into the San Francisco-Vallejo freight business; their first boat was the sternwheeler Sunol.

Then on Aug. 10, 1895, competition began. The 126-foot Monticello, built in Seattle, began the San Francisco-Vallejo run with Z. J. Hatch as owner, under the name of Hatch Bros. (Z. J.and Charles N. )

In 1898 the Adens matched this with the Corcoran. In 1900 the Hatch Bros. built a second ship up north, the General Frisbie, and in 1903 added another passenger steamer, the small Arrow. The following year the name of the firm became Monticello S.S. Co.

The Adens then counted with the Grace Barton, but in 1913 they retired from the shipping business. But the family has continued to be influential in civic life in our community. (See photo of the Frisbie adjoining this column.)

ELECTRIC RAILWAY

On July 4, 1905, the Monticello line coordinated their service with the electric trains of the S.F., Napa Valley and Calistoga R.R., which ran up Georgia and north on Sonoma streets. Shortly after this the, steamer Napa Valley was built and added to the fleet. The electric railway ceased 30 years ago.

Monticello had many more boats. In 1909 it purchased the Sehome, a sidewheeler, which was converted to a twinscrew ferry. In 1918 the Ashbury Park was purchased in New Jersey, and renamed the City of Sacramento in 1925. Then in 1924 it bought the Florida in the ease, and renamed her the Calistoga.

Many remember the collision, in fog off Rodeo, between Sehome and General Frisbie. Sehome sank, but all were saved.

The personalities of the Monticello line were an indelible part of Vallejo. The late C. Ferry Hatch was a leading civic leader; his brother, William, who passed on during WWI, and the port engineer, the late Sam Sutton, were prominent in Vallejo life.

THE END OF THE RUNS

About 1918 a small auto ferry company, the Rodeo-Vallejo Ferry, began crossing to
Rodeo. Its operators, Aven J. Hanford and Oscar H. Klatt, ran the Issaquah.

Then a rival outfit, the Six-Minute Ferry Co., began operating an auto ferry from Morrow Cove (now the C. M.A.) to Crockett. Their first boat was the San Jose, and the men behind it included many prominent Vallejo citizens: Forbes H. Brown, O. G. Gordon, Quincy M. Spencer, Callie Fitzgerald, to name a few.

The Monticello operators also converted their steamers to handle autos. Traffic losses then began, with better highways and shorter ferry hauls. In 1927 the Berkeley-Hyde St. ferry began runs to San Francisco.

The age of gasoline and rubber began to spell the doom of bay ferries. In the 1920s the Hatch ownership in the Monticello was sold to the Golden Gate Ferry Co. In 1929 this company in turn became the Southern Pacific Golden Gate Ferries. The opening of the Carquinez Bridge in May of 1927 was discouraging, but the final blow came in 1937 with the completion of the S. F. Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge, and in that year the last ferry steamed out of Vallejo.

May we editorialize in closing, however, by saying that Solano’s water highways are today its single greatest asset!

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