Relics And VIP Visits

By Ernest D. Wichels

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The year 1965 brings to an end the five-year observance of the Civil War Centennial. And this brings to mind a few local reminders of that conflict, and several other noted historical facts not readily appreciated by most Solano citizens.

Even though the major events of the Civil War, 1861-65, occurred two thousand and more miles from our county, some of the prized artifacts are located in Alden Park, Mare Island Naval Shipyard.

Mare Island’s first commander, as well as Vallejo property owner and taxpayer, was the immortal Farragut. He fought his most famous battle aboard the HARTFORD at Mobile Bay. The bay was protected by three forts, Morgan, Gaines and Powell. On Aug. 5, 1864, Farragut and his fleet of 14 ships took the harbor.

The two 9-inch Dahlgren smooth-bore cannon from the HARTFORD, which silenced Fort Morgan, are in Mare Island’s park.

OTHER FAMOUS GUNS

During the Civil War many raiders for the Confederates were fitted out in Great Britain. One of these was the ALABAMA which, under Captain Semmes, inflicted more damage to Union shipping than the combined Confederate Navy during the war.

Finally the ALABAMA was cornered in the French port of Cherbourg by the American frigate KEARSARGE; on June 19, 1864 the ALABAMA came out to duel with the KEARSARGE. The KEARSARGE sank the raider, and the two forward 11-inch pivot guns which did most of the damage are in Mare Island’s gun park.

Here also is the twisted bronze propeller of the U. S. man-of-war NIPSIC which, along with two sister ships and three German vessels, was wrecked in the hurricane of March 15, 1889 in Apia harbor, Samoa.

Graves in the Mare Island cemetery mark the resting place of 19 of the 50 Americans who died there; a memorial plaque records the event in St. Peter’s Chapel on the island.

The “Robinson Crusoe” anchor, so-called, is in this park. It was lost by the British ship
CENTURION in 1740 at Juan Fernandez Island off Chile, just 32 years after Selkirk was rescued there-and his life immortalized by DeFoe in the aforementioned story. The U.S.S. LACKAWANNA recovered the anchor in 1882.

Here, too, is the ship’s bell of the Spanish warship ULLOA, sunk by Admiral Dewey at Manila on May 1, 1898.

Many artifacts from the Frigate INDEPENDENCE, built in 1812, have been retained by Mare Island.

FAMOUS PERSONALITIES

These various relics surround the shipyard’s bandstand-and here, in 1918, a musician petty officer of the United States Navy made his mark as an orchestra leader. Paul Whiteman was a member of the Naval Training Camp band (in the area called the “Snake Ranch”), but led the combo section for dances on the island. The Mare Island Bulletin of Dec. 24, 1918 wrote: “This is a professional camp orchestra, regarded as the best west of Chicago. Paul Whiteman is the leader.” And here the great maestro was launched.

Across the street from the park is the administration building built by Farragut in 1855-with rooms for special guests.

One was President Rutherford B. Hayes, who came on Sept. 21, 1880; another, King Kalakau of the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii) on Dec. 2, 1874.

VALLEJO’S FAMOUS GUEST

Solano County occupies a sort of cross-roads spot on the western map, and for more than a century has heard the footfall of many noted persons.

But there was one, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1850, who came here in the week preceding Memorial Day, 1880, and left without even the editor of the Vallejo Chronicle knowing about it.

This sad-eyed man and his bride had been married on May 19 in Monterey. They trekked northward on their honeymoon, and after leaving Vallejo went on to Calistoga and up Mount St. Helena where the remainder of the summer was spent in a cabin near the quicksilver mines.

Here Robert Louis Stevenson wrote the “Silverado Squatters,” while his bride, the former Fannie Os-bourne, tried to nurse his frail body to normal health.
Stevenson and bride were registered at the Frisbie House, which then stood at the northeast corner of 2nd and Lemon Sts., South Vallejo.

**VALLEJO Didn’T IMPRESS**

But if Robert Louis Stevenson’s presence went unnoticed in May, 1880, the author didn’t hesitate to write about it later.

In one of his letters he referred to his lodgings and the city as “the place of fallen fortunes, like the town. The night was spent in a dismal bedroom where the stove would not burn, although it would smoke; and while one window wouldn’t open, the other wouldn’t shut.”

This gentle man also wrote that he looked out of his hotel window across the bay and saw Mt. Tamalpais “as blue as a sapphire.”

We admit that this famous author’s contact with Vallejo was a fleeting one. But when junior reads “Treasure Island,” “New Arabian Nights, “A Child’s Garden of Verses,” or tries to fathom “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” mother or grandmother may wish to boast: “Tomorrow I’ll show you where RLS slept in Vallejo.”