Planking On Streets

By Ernest D. Wichels

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Our current City Council meetings include debate on almost everything “under the sun.” but one of the subjects which is seldom discussed is the condition of streets. It was far different in the old days.

For the half century preceding 1900-and even since then, the City Trustees wrestled with the problems of street paving, or lack of it.

We shall recite a few instances. What may come as a surprise to our readers is that, in many cases, the property owners simply asked the Trustees for permission to do the work themselves.

On Jan. 27, 1872, the Vallejo Chronicle reported the following: “Messrs. Peterson, Welch and others have been engaged today in smoothing down Virginia and a portion of Marin streets with a harrow and heavy roller. The work will be paid for by private parties living on those streets.”

How many of our teenagers have seen a “harrow”?

A week later, Feb. 1, 1872, the Chronicle reported that the City Trustees had given “several enterprising property owners on Virginia Street permission to have that street planked from the waterfront to Marin Street.”

WOODEN PAVING

The Trustees’ meeting of Oct. 5, 1878 (Trustees Wilson, Greeves, McInnis, Reese and Brownlie) approved the following items:

“E. J. Wilson given permission to plank the center of the street in front of his property on Sacramento from Georgia Street to the alley.

“McInnis moved that the street commissioner be authorized to go on and re-advertise for proposals to plank Georgia Street between the east side of Santa Clara and Sacramento. Also, necessary repairs to planking on the Fifth Street fill were authorized.”
CHRISTMAS GIFT

“The city Trustees,” said the Chronicle on Dec. 24, 1888, “have laid a plank walk on El Dorado Street from Jackson’s corner on Maryland, and now foot passengers between North and South Vallejo can travel in comfort. This is a worthy Christmas Present.”

An editorial in this newspaper on Nov. 24, 1869, demanded that the Trustees provide the street crossings on Georgia, at the intersections of Marin, Sacramento and Santa Clara, with more than a single board width, saying: “Only one person can be accommodated on the narrow planks, and during slippery times it is impossible for two pedestrians to pass each other without one being ‘crowded orstepping off in the mud, sometimes a foot in depth.”

That same week, in its up-county news, the Chronicle said: “Work commenced this morning on a new plank walk between Suisun and Fairfield; it will be five feet wide, and the scantlings will be covered with one-inch redwood planks.” Few of our readers realize that Suisun City once was located on an island, separated from Fairfield by a marsh, under water at high tide.

PLANKS CREATED PRANKS

The Chronicle noted that on New Year’s Eve, 1869, the town “hoodlums” piled up all Georgia Street planks and built a huge bonfire in the 300 block.

A wry note in the paper on Dec. 18, 1876: “A Vallejoan who got up this morning to find some of the boards on his sidewalk stolen, thinks that last night must have been the coldest of the season, and some poor family needed warmth.”

As late as 1915 perhaps half of Vallejo’s sidewalks were wooden, instead of concrete.

And the issue of Dec. 4, 1876, discusses the disposal of planks, “A crowd of Chinamen with baskets stand ready to pick up and carry away, with or without permission, all the rotten planks dug up on Georgia Street by the roadmaster’s men.”

VALLEJO’S HORSE CAR

Yes, Vallejo had a horse car.

It provided transportation from about 1878 to about 1885 from downtown to the railroad depot at the Maine Street crossing.

It was a narrow gauge track, a small lightweight passenger coach accommodated 10 or
12 passengers, with one horse. Until about 1930 the coach stood in the backyard of a home near the southwest corner of Solane Avenue and Benicia Road.

It ran from the 400 block of Georgia, south on Sonoma to Maine, east on Maine to Sutter, south to Pennsylvania, and then in a curve across lots to about where the Times-Herald and Chronicle plant is now located at Napa and Maryland streets; then to the depot.

Wet weather created problems for the street car, too. An 1884 item in the press tells of the horse getting off the planking (laid on cross-ties between the rails) and being mired in the mud. “Four Napa-bound passengers missed the train,” wrote the editor.

Other transportation included Daly and Newcombe’s “omnibus” operating every half-hour between North and South Vallejo at 121/2 cents.

For those who preferred to walk to South Vallejo, the short-cut was via the planking on the Southern Pacific trestle. Tidewater came almost to Lemon Street; the area was filled in following the construction of the waterfront bulkhead in 1914.