

Solano shows off at 1915 Panama Expo

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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On Feb. 20, the much-talked about Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco was to open its gates. This exhibition - and the more regional San Diego Panama-California Exposition a few months earlier - celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal.

For weeks before the opening, the Vacaville Reporter ran a photograph of one of the completed buildings as a special feature.

The California Spanish style architecture was much admired, built by some of the best architects of the time. On Jan. 8, 1915, for example, The Reporter depicted the vaulted entrance to the Palace of Food Products; "[Its] half dome is known as the Half Dome of Vigor and is 113 feet in height. Brilliant, riotous colors are employed in the mosaic in the vault of the half dome, which was designed by Jules Guerin, America's most celebrated decorative artist."

The feature on Jan. 29 was titled: "Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Greatest and Most Marvelous of All Celebrations, Opens Completed in Every Detail on Feb. 20, 1915. Forty of the World's Great Nations to Join with America In Celebrating the Opening of the Panama Canal In a Conclave Unsurpassed In History. Wonderful Exhibits From all Lands Show the World's Best Progress."

Small wonder then that for weeks before and during the exposition, the Southern Pacific Co. ran an advertisement inviting the public to travel to San Francisco: "The Greatest and most Important in the World's History. Stupendous and Magnificent. Reduced Passenger Rates. Our Service is Comfortable, Frequent, and protected by Electric Block Signals. Our agents will be glad to give you further information!"

March 29 was dedicated as the Solano Day at the fair and preparations took place throughout the Solano to represent the county well. The Southern Pacific Co. furnished a special train, the Vacaville Reporter announced on March 26: "... From Winters Monday morning, and returning will leave San Francisco at 11 p.m., thus giving the excursionists a long day at the exposition and an opportunity to see the illumination in the evening, which is one of the greatest features of the exposition. ...

"The train will leave Winters at 5:45, Vacaville at 6:10, Elmira 6:30, Suisun 6:50 and Benicia 7:30, arriving at San Francisco at 9:30.

“Round trip fare from Vacaville cost \$2.75. In addition to the railroad fare, the admission to the grounds will be 50 cents, and those who are economically inclined need not use a cent more. Lunches can be taken and eaten on the grounds. Hot coffee and chocolate can be obtained at many places, if desired.”

After their arrival at the ferry building in San Francisco, participants assembled at the Fillmore Street entrance of the exposition, to meet with the other delegations from Solano County. They then formed a parade, led by the U.S. Marine Corps band and the First battalion Fourth U.S. Marine Corps, and marched through the exposition area to the California building.

Grouped by city, each section was led by the respective mayor and city representatives, members of the Chamber of Commerce, school superintendents and city delegations. Besides the official delegates, many civic groups marched in the parade, including the Good Templar's Home for Orphans in Vallejo, leading to the strict admonition: “The different women's clubs and organizations are earnestly requested to co-operate with their respective localities.”

Speeches, music, the presentation of a commemorative plaque by an official of the exposition to the Hon. H.J. Widenmann, who “accepted (it) for the county with a neat speech,” and in the afternoon, a tea dansant, followed the parade.

The Vacaville Reporter recapped the event on April 2: “Our Day At The Fair.

Residents of Solano County Enjoyed the Sights. By Boat and Trains They flocked to the Great Exposition... Solano Day - last Monday - at the Panama Pacific exposition was a success ... One San Francisco paper stated that the attendance from Solano county that day was 3,400, but in the interest of truth the first figure in the number could be eliminated and a very accurate estimate reached.”

The article also recounted the exciting end of the day for members of the delegation from Benicia. “The boat from Vallejo, besides the delegation from that city, brought about 70 children from the orphan's home and they certainly had the time of their young lives viewing the grounds and exhibits and visiting the Zone, and to add more thrills to an eventful day, wound up with a ship wreck, just after the boat left the exposition ferry slip. The boat ran on a rock and began to fill, but fortunately was so near to the shore that the passengers were easily rescued.”

While the Vacaville Reporter chronicled events surrounding the exposition in detail, one episode tied to the Vacaville area remained unnoticed. Famous operatic star Aldanita Wolfskill, “The California Nightingale,” granddaughter of early settler John Reid Wolfskill, sang at the opening ceremony of the Panama Pacific Exposition.

A contralto, she received her education in San Francisco at the Irving Institute. She then went to Berlin, Germany, to study music at the Scharwenka Conservatory and the opera school of Stern's Conservatory. She made her debut at the Beethoven Saal (hall) in Berlin, "at which time the Berlin critics of music were moved to flattering expressions concerning her vocal gifts and artistic attainments," according to the San Francisco Examiner of Sept. 29, 1912.

In 1916, she decided to give up her promising music career. The Examiner reported on Aug. 10, 1916: "Star Forsakes Stage For Farm."

The story stated, "Miss Aldanita Wolfskill has forsaken the operatic stage for the farm. Papers have just been drawn whereby she will lease, with an option to buy, the famous Wolfskill homestead near Winters, in Solano county. The property is a fruit ranch and Miss Wolfskill will personally attend to the details of its management."

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