

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Charming Port Costa

The tiny hamlet of Port Costa is tucked away in a deep valley three miles from Crockett through the rolling hills, and just 40 minutes from San Francisco. I spent a most delightful weekend there and in Rodeo recently as a house guest of Mr. and Mrs. W. E. van Loben Seis, who spend most of the summer there where they have business interests.

The main street in Port Costa is lined with lacy old locust trees and tall elms. It ends very abruptly on the steep bank of the Sacramento River at the Carquinez Straits. "The town is very old, pretty, peaceful and sunny, with a population of 285 friendly people," as told in Pictorial, a small newspaper featuring Port Costa.

Three years ago, Bill Rich, a young man of Cherokee Indian blood, bought most of the main buildings and definitely has set about to restore and re-create the town as it appeared in former days. First of all, he told us, was the building in which the town's restaurant is located — Russell Noyes is the proprietor. The two large dining halls are refurnished in early California style.

We had dinner there — and may I say that it was an excellent one with friendly service and generous hospitality. I was charmed and hope someday that I will be invited to return and have the experience and pleasure all over again.

Next door at the river's edge, stands the Burlington Hotel, an ancient yellow three-story building with tall corner bay windows. It is at present undergoing a complete renovation and will be ready for two apartments, one for Bill Rich, the owner whose vision saw the historical possibilities of this quaint little town; and the other for my hosts, Mr. and Mrs. W. E. van Loben Seis, who will spend several months there each summer.

The ground floor will be occupied by interesting shops and a combination library and museum, which will serve as a meeting place for the Port Costa Old Town Improvement Group, whose members are pledged to preserve the town's original character.

Across the street and under the old, tall trees, is a huge concrete warehouse already pretty much restored and now housing five separate antique shops: Waterfront

Antiques, So & So Shop, Arts and Interiors, Peggy's Shop and Mimi Paul Shop.

The warehouse was formerly used for the storage of sugar, wine, grain, and furniture. Sloan's San Francisco, made use of it after the earthquake and fire in 1906, beginning more than one hundred years ago, when large ships came into the port to load and to land the products which they carried.

A small U.S. Post Office, the original, a tiny building which resembles a tool shed, still stands on the street above a tackle and bait shop, a bakery, a grocery and a barber shop, presided over by the honorable "Mayor" Coppa, Port Costa's only barber shop for 40 years.

"Port Costa is haunted by memories of a great enterprise long come to a halt. In the eighties and nineties, it was one of the largest sailing ship ports of the world, with as many as 600 square riggers dropping sails to load grain in a single year," according to an article appearing in a recent issue of the Pictorial. In those days there were no roads into the country beyond the port.

Ships came up the Sacramento river to load wheat bound for England. On their return the holds were filled with stones for ballast, which are still in evidence, along the riverbank. Deep water allowed the passage of vessels as large as ocean liners, as it does now.

In 1877 the Southern Pacific Railroad brought its trains from the Central Valley through Port Costa on the way to Oakland. The long trains were broken in sections and ferried across the straits to Benicia on twin boats, "Solano" and "Contra Costa," the world's largest ferry boats. When the Carquinez Bridge was constructed, the traffic was diverted from Port Costa and left it a quiet, dead-end town, until this recent restoration was begun by one man.

I hope the publishers of Pictorial will not mind if I use two of the amusing tales that are told in the paper.

"There was a town judge who ran a saloon around the corner from the jail. He had a clever way of increasing his income by arresting and fining the drunks coming out of his saloon. Woe to the man who did not get drunk at the judge's bar — he was fined double or triple the cost to the judge's patrons.

"Another saloon keeper was L. Raffetto, who kept his sales in whisky and games of chance from straying by giving change in tokens instead of cash.

“The tokens, of course, were not honored at any other bar.”

“The town has had a long sleep.” His white hair glinting in the sunlight, Angelo Coppa, honorary mayor of Port Costa, shifted his observation chair under a giant elm on the town’s street. “We’s waking up. But not too wide awake. Just enough to restore buildings and put things ship-shape.”

We had the pleasure of meeting the mayor and Bill Rich, restorer.