

# Sacramento River Delta Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

"For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past." – Walt Whitman

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 28, NUMBER 2

DECEMBER 2008

### President's Notes

Happy Holidays to each of you! As I conclude my second year as president, it is evident, as my dad always says "Many Hands Light Work Make!" Our Historical Society is visible in many places throughout the community and it is because many of you are promoting our activities and the Resource Center. Thank you to everyone!

Board members CJ Jensen, Debbie Chan, Tom Herzog and I were actively involved in planning and promoting the opening of the Locke Boarding House Museum. We assisted with the wording on the panels within the museum, with the promotion of the opening via postcards to our members and participated in the opening ceremony along with hosting a station within the Museum offering SRDHS membership information. The Locke Foundation has office space within the museum and is open for regular hours. The California State Parks did a fine job coordinating the project. I encourage you each to stop by and see a bit of the history of Locke.

Please take a read-thru of the enclosed proposed bylaw changes in Articles III and IV as our membership will be voting on the changes at our January 20, 2009 Annual General Meeting. Besides this important piece of business, our featured speakers will be Jayne and Terry Alcorn in costume, sharing the history of their home "The Saul Runyon House".

In case you missed our general meetings this fall, our September meeting focused on the "Archaeology of the Central Valley and the Delta" with State Archaeologist Christopher Corey. In November we welcomed Ken Scheidegger, President of Discover the Delta Foundation, with an overview of their efforts and vision for the future pertaining to the Information Center at Highways 12 and 160. The building will reflect the agricultural orientation of the California Delta. It will house both interpretive displays and meeting space and expects to open in the fall of 2008.

Looking forward to seeing you January 20<sup>th</sup>.

Judy

### WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Barbara Damion from Sacramento  
Amy Wheeler Howen from Lakeview, Oregon  
William Just from Walnut Grove

Also, **THANKS** to all those who have renewed their memberships for 2009!

Sacramento River Delta Historical Society

JANUARY GENERAL MEETING & ANNUAL POTLUCK

Tuesday, January 20, 2009 at 6:00 pm

**Jean Harvie community Center** 14273 River Road, Walnut Grove

**Terry & Jayne Alcorn speak of their home - "The Saul Runyon House"**

Please bring food for 10: A—N Hot Dish O—S Salad T—Z Dessert

Please call Judy Culbertson 916-775-1894 if you have any questions

**WATER TRANSPORTATION**

Part Two

**Interisland Travel: Ferries, Launches and others**

By Kathleen Graham Hutchinson

River steamboats provided commercial freight movement and passenger connections between designated towns and cities, but smaller craft were employed to make all other necessary Delta connections before railroads and highway bridges. Smaller craft, ferries and launches knitted islands and communities together and acted as feeders for the river carriers. Steamboat passenger packets did stop when flagged at individual landings; the destination of the passenger was almost always a designated town or city where the packet stopped regularly.

Ferries have been a Delta conveyance since 1850. By 1950 there were still six operating. Today in 2008, there remain three in the Ryer Island vicinity. The ferries connected with, at best, rudimentary roads/bridle paths and foot paths. These roads or paths were at the foot of the outside of the levee; the top of the levee being sand.

Ferries were often times a scow/lighter design, approximately 20 x 50 feet. The slip was at the bottom of a narrow ramp which crossed diagonally down the inside of the levee. It was a steep decent except during high water. Life preservers were 2 x 12 inch planks 4 or 5 feet long with a slot in each side to use as a handle. The ferries kept a stack of these to satisfy the law.

Owned by individuals or partners, the ferries began as commercial toll

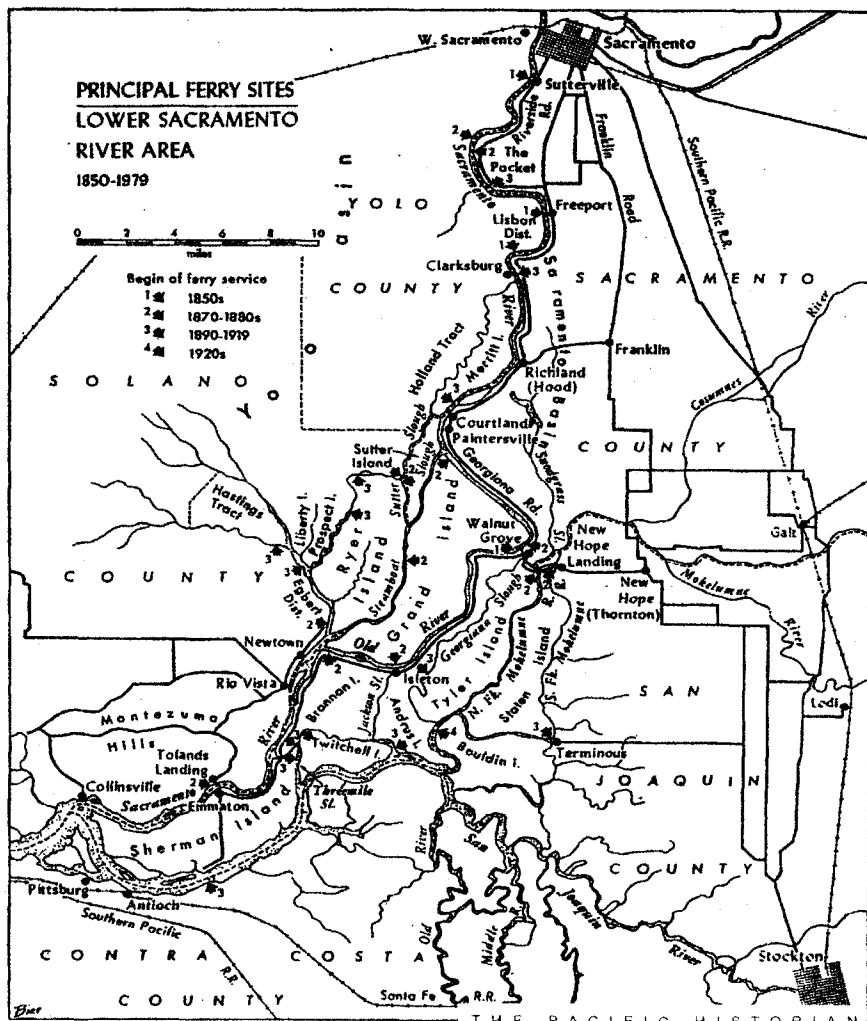
ferries (commercial interests, land development, extra income provided motivation) or as private convenience. The owner received a franchise from the county which set the tolls and which required posting of a bond and were known to charge a premium for ferrying passengers "after hours." Gates were used to keep livestock penned. However, when approaching shore, livestock sometimes rushed the front, broke the barrier and swam to shore.

Most ferries were cable propelled but some were free-floating side-wheel. In a cable ferry the engine turns two sheaves (big wheels) which reel in the underwater cable which in turn pulls the ferry across the water. If the boat takes up slack the cable springs above the surface. If the cable breaks, the ferry drifts until corralled. The ferry rides the current on pontoons which deflect the water. Some early ferries were no more than rowboats. The old ferry at Isleton was hand-cranked. It ran day and night and its tenders were George Fisher and Sam Dorsey.

Bill Hutchinson, Sr. told this story about the Isleton Ferry. It went:

*Mr. and Mrs. A.J.T. Reynolds of Walnut Grove were preparing to board the ferry. Mr. Reynolds slowly drove his National Auto down the steep ramp to the slip. The car stalled on the ramp and Mr. Reynolds got out to see what was wrong. He slipped and fell in front of the car. The brakes didn't hold and Mr. Reynolds, prostrate, stopped the car. Bystanders rushed to the car to help the Reynolds and Mrs. Reynolds, still sitting in the car, waved them off. Mr. Reynolds, remarking, "Don't bother with Mr. Reynolds, he can stand lots of pain."*

In 1851 John W. Sharp organized a ferry service between Grand Island, Andrus Island, Tyler Island, Staten Island and Walnut Grove using a rowboat. In 1866 Sperry Dye took over from the Sharps. Dye was the agent for the John W. Sharp estate. However



John W. "Dime" Sharp captained the ferry. Alex Brown operated the ferry between 1892 – 1894 (for the Sharp estate?) followed by Clara B. Lord, N. C. McQueen and W. G. Clark (also for the Sharp estate? Clara B. Lord was a Sharp daughter.) In 1916 the Walnut Grove Ferry Company was sold by Dye to Sacramento County.

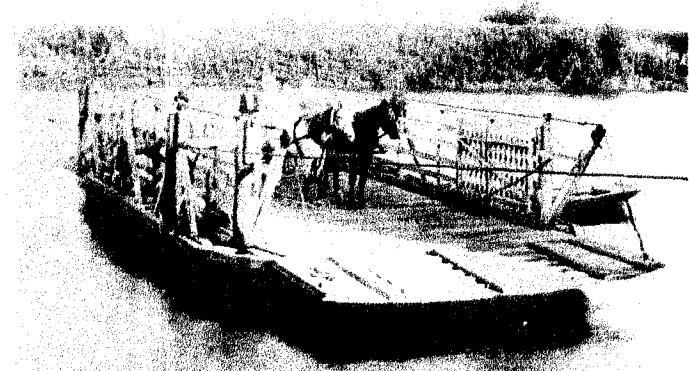
Another digression:

*John Brown, Alex Brown's son, after having a few drinks at the hotel after work at the Bank of Alex Brown, left to drive to the ferry on route home. It was foggy and he told his pals "follow me boys." Off they drove to the slip and into the water. There was no ferry at the slip – foggy and groggy.*

In 1870 Robert E. and William Beasley opened the "Twin House Ferry" between Emmaton on Sherman Island to Tolands Landing on the west bank of the Sacramento River, four miles downriver from Rio Vista.

The Georgiana Road went down the east bank of the Sacramento River and ferries took the road over Georgiana Slough, Jackson Slough, and Three Mile Slough. In 1871 Jackson Slough between Andrus and Brannan Islands was dammed, eliminating the ferry.

By 1872, John Miller placed in operation his ferry "Miller Ferry" on the Mokelumne River between Tyler Island and Staten Island. He apparently first operated a ferry across Tyler Slough at Walnut Grove.



Miller's Ferry, North Fork of the Mokelumne River, Tyler Island

In 1874 Andrew Ryan opened a ferry between Newtown (lower tip of Grand Island, McIntyre Point) to the northwest corner of Brannan Island. It was first called the "Old River Ferry". Later, post 1913, when it stopped in addition at Rio Vista, it was called "The Triangle Ferry". Harry Lawson owned the ferry until 1876. In 1892, after weeks of negotiation, Fred Lauritzen was awarded the franchise which he held until 1909. He operated it as an all-purpose ferry. Julius Anderson ran it for a year followed in 1910 by F. E.

Benjamin. By 1909 the equipment had deteriorated and a side-wheel ferry replaced the original ferry. Benjamin up-graded the Grand Island road access and the ferry was considered a success by 1915. It was the first major ferry, East-West, in the Delta linking Sacramento and Solano counties. In the early twentieth century a red painted ferry operated from McIntyre Point to Rio Vista only.

In 1878 a flat-boat ferry operated between Walnut Grove and New Hope Landing crossing the South Fork of the Mokelumne River.



Walnut Grove Ferry, prior to 1918

Grand Island and Paintersville/Pierson District were served by the Grand Island Ferriage Company organized by Mrs. Reuben Kercheval and Mary Runyon.

Freeport and the Lisbon District were connected as early as 1852. George C. Jackson established the service and was succeeded by Stan Meyers. In 1876 John Soto bought the business. Fares were: teams \$2-3.00, buggies \$1.50, 50¢ each loose stock, \$1.00 per pound sacks and bales, and pedestrians 25¢. Vehicles and animals were carried on deck and pedestrians carried in a rowboat lashed to the side.

TOLL RATES OF SELECTED FERRIES OPERATING IN SACRAMENTO COUNTY <sup>2</sup>				
Ferry Dates	Beasley (1870/1876)	Lawson (1876)	Walnut Grove (1886/1889)	Isleton 1892
Pedestrian	.25	.50	.10	.10
Rider & horse	.75		.25	.25
Wagon or buggy & horse	1.50	3.50	.25	.25
Wagon & 2 horses	2.00	4.50	.50	.50
Wagon & 4 horses	3.00		.75	.75
Sheep, hogs, goats	.05 ea	3.00 per 100	15 ea (1-9)	.10
Other loose stock	.50 ea		.08 ea (10+)	.08
			20 ea (1-9)	
			15 ea (10+)	
Horses		.75 ea		
Cattle		.50 ea 40.00 for 100		
Crew, header, & horses		25.00 (one-way)		
		30.00 (two-ways)		
Separator	1.50		2.00	
Steam engine	5.00		2.00	
Freight (sacks & bales)	1.00 per ton			
Barley cracker			1.50	
Cook Wagon			1.00	

In 1894, J.H. Thomas established a ferry at Ryer Island and was succeeded by his heirs and then by a Mr. Ettinger.

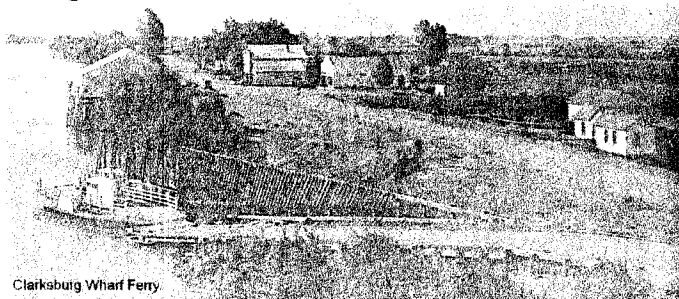
There is evidence that by 1895 a ferry connected Staten Island and Terminous on Bouldin Island.

In 1897 John Hollenbeck opened service between Ryer Island and Howard's Landing, Grand Island. Prior to 1906 the eastern terminus was moved to Walker Landing.

The Merritt Island – Courtland Ferry is thought to pre-date 1900. Tenders at one time were Joe "Sprigg" Lee and "Uncle" Joe White. Although in chronic bad repair (a roustabout was hired to be at the ready to bail), it was open until 11 p.m. charging 50¢ per car and 10¢ per pedestrian. The ferry was discontinued in 1924 when the Paintersville Bridge opened.

There was also a ferry between Merritt Island and Hood, connecting with the railroad. It was a county (Yolo and Sacramento) free ferry and at one time the tenders were Bert Waterbury and the aforementioned Joe "Sprigg" Lee. Disaster struck twice: a tender fell overboard in fog and drowned and the engine exploded destroying one-third of the deck.

The Clarksburg ferry operated between 1894 and 1913 and again 1919 and 1937. The slip on the east bank was at Eagle Point.



The famous double paddlewheel ferry "Mary Ann" lost power in one of her paddlewheels, corkscrewing downriver until corralled. She also is known for having lost a load of hardwood flooring for the new high school. That also floated downstream to be retrieved by locals who put the boards to use in their own houses.

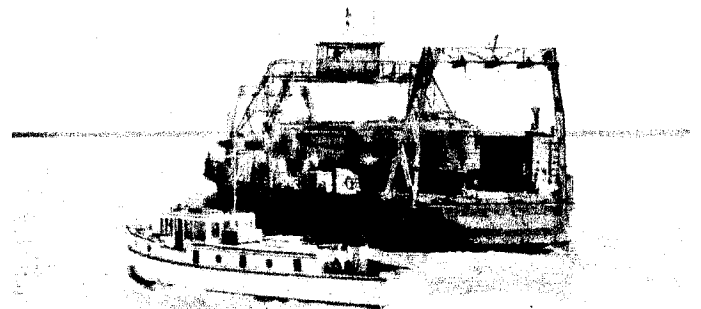
In 1904 F.C. Lauritzen ran a ferry on Three-Mile Slough between Twitchell and Sherman Islands. In 1908 Charles Studerus was unable to renew his franchise for the East Twitchell-Andrus route. In 1919 this crossing was abandoned in favor of Brannan and Sherman Islands. Additionally, Lauritzen ran the Sherman Island – Toland's Landing ferry but after the Sacramento River

was dredged and straightened it has been speculated that the ferry probably didn't run much after 1913.

By the early 1900s a number of ferries were transferred to Sacramento County: 1901 Sutter Island, 1903 Glide (Lisbon District/The Pocket), 1916 Walnut Grove, 1920 Clarksburg. In 1932 the State of California took over operation of the Ryer Island Ferries – "The J. Mack" (cable) and the "Real McCoy" (free floating). Counties began service on Three-Mile Slough between Andrus and Bouldin Islands and in the Yolo Basin. Between Twitchell and Sherman Islands, Sacramento County operated free ferries 1900 – 1920s. A ferry operated around 1907 from the northeast corner of Ryer Island on Miner and Sutter Sloughs and possibly between Ryer and Prospect Island. Free ferries were also run (by Yolo and Solano Counties) between Ryer Island, the Holland Tract (New Netherlands) and Liberty Island in the 1920s. Ferries to Prospect Island, the Hastings Tract, and the Egbert District date from World War I.

In the 1920's specifically built side-wheel auto ferries crossed the San Joaquin River from Sherman Island to Antioch and the Mokelumne River (Highway 12). The San Joaquin River ferries were built by Lauritzen of Rio Vista and named "Sherman" and "Victory". These ferries had local signal whistles for the lower Sherman bootleggers to alert them when Revenue Agents were in the area.

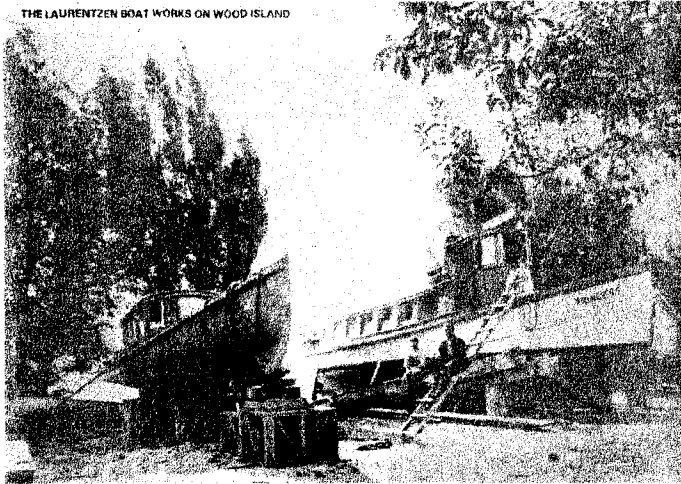
There also were the railroad ferries owned by the Sacramento Northern RR. It's "Navy" comprised of the "Bridget" and "Ramon". The railroad ferried between Chipp's Island to West Pittsburg to connect with the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern into the Bay Area.



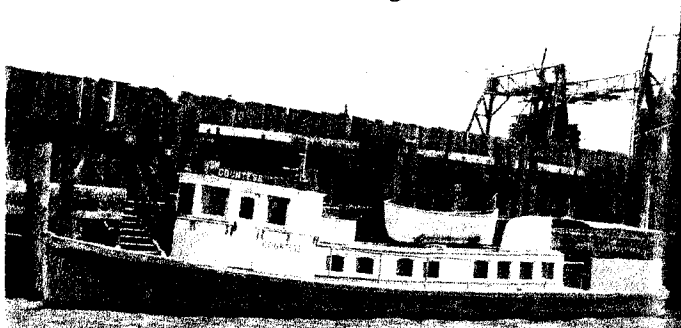
Train Ferry Ramon

The ferry tender's houses remain in Walnut Grove "now off the levee behind the "Bridgetender Mall") and likely at Giusti's (hidden somewhere within the building). For many years on Grand Island, a small house stood at the top of the levee, outside, opposite the

old west bulwark for the old Grand Island Bridge. This could have also been the ferry's western slip. The ferryman's house at Hood also stood well into the twentieth century. It was on the upstream edge of Hood on the inside of the levee.



Launches also knit the Delta and its residents together. Some of the best known launches were owned by the Lauritzens. Christian August Lauritzen was one of the brothers. In his youth he skulled passengers from Rio Vista to Wood Island. (To skull one uses a skulling oar from the stern to propel the boat.) At 16 he began work as a roustabout on his brother's Santa Fe Transportation Company river boat. His brother, Henry, was a riverboat captain. At 32, in 1902, with his brother Fred, he bought the launch "Doris". It was 40 feet long, seated 12 passengers, and had a 2 cycle 20 horsepower Atlas gas engine. It cruised at 10 mph on a route between Rio Vista and Antioch, stopping in between at Sherman Island and Collinsville. They had a competitor in the "Ellen". To compete, they bought the "Gwendolyn". They ran one boat in front and the other in back of the "Ellen" and froze out the competition. They then bought the "Ellen" for \$1500. In 1909 they formed Lauritzen Transportation Company and moved headquarters to Antioch. And, in 1909, they launched the "Princess". She had a fifty foot cabin, toilet and good seats. In 1912 the "Empress" was launched. Her cabin was seventy feet and she had a 150 cc Atlas Engine. In 1913 the launch



"Dutchess" slid down the ways. She was also used as a tugboat as was their speedy launch "Countess".

"Princess" was placed on the Walnut Grove - Isleton run and "Countess" on the Antioch - Stockton run. All these launches were advertized as "fast motor launches" featuring "luxury conveyance" between Sacramento - Stockton - Antioch and towns in-between. In 1918 Lauritzen sold the boats. Bus transportation had become cheaper to operate. The launch fare was 50¢ one way; 75¢ roundtrip. It cost 25¢ from lower Sherman Island to Antioch. The launches had a crew of four. Other launch companies also operated. Lewis McCall owned the "Lafayette" which ran between Walnut Grove and Sacramento. The "Oriole" was another well-known launch.

Notice to Patrons of

## Launch Lafayette

Running Between

### Walnut Grove and Sacramento

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**COMMENCING MONDAY NOV. 23, 1903**  
and continuing until further notice, the Launch Lafayette will run between Walnut Grove and Sacramento as per the following schedule:

Leaving Sacramento Sunday, 1:30 p. m.; Tuesday, 1:30 p. m.; Thursday, 1:30 p. m.; Friday, 1:30 p. m.

Leaving Walnut Grove Monday 7:00 a. m.; Wednesday, 7:00 a. m. Friday, 7:00 a. m. Saturday, 7:00 a. m.

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Sacramento Landing: Davis & Johnson's Fish Market  
Front Street, Between K and L  
Phone, Yale 764      **LEW McCALL, Propr.**

Launch Lafayette



Boats were used for other purposes as well. In the previous article snagboats were mentioned as well as towboats, lighters, barges and hay schooners. Dredgers were ubiquitous. Beginning with the continuous bucket dredgers to big bucket dredges and culminating in the

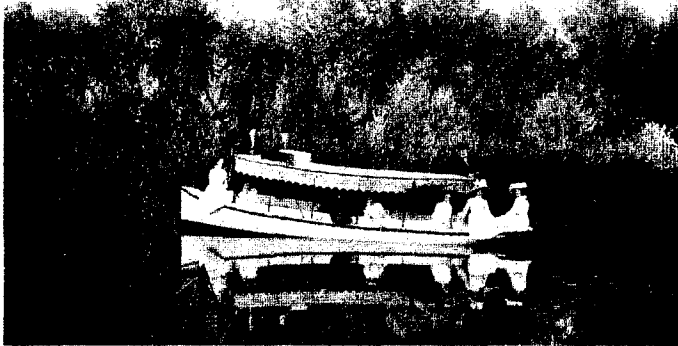
world famous clam-shell dredge was responsible for all major levee building and channel deepening.

There were specialized boats for mail (riverboats under contract also participated in carrying the mail), the school boat which was a forerunner of the school bus and the dairy launch which carried milk to market. Mortuaries rented time on boats such as "Pride of the River" or probably launches which collected and returned mourners.

Commercial fishing boats were a common sight on the Sacramento River until the early 1950s. The earliest Delta fishing boat was a sprit-rigged sailboat measuring about 20 x 6 feet with an 8 foot beam and a retractable keel for shallow water. The removable rudder allowed the net to be hauled from the stern. She had a two man crew, could be rowed or sailed and was in the Delta waters as late as 1929. By 1905 the hull was double-ended measuring 28 x 9 feet powered by one 2 cylinder engine "one lugger"). It was called a "potato engine", an onomatopoeic description of its sound. This propeller was followed by the "Bow-Picker" 24/26 x 8 feet. It was powered by four six-cylinder engines which made 12 – 15 knots. It had an open cockpit forward of the engine and a roller in the bow to pull in the net. The roller ran off the engine.

Pleasure launches were the forerunner of most type of modern day pleasure craft. Some early pleasure launches

Private launch

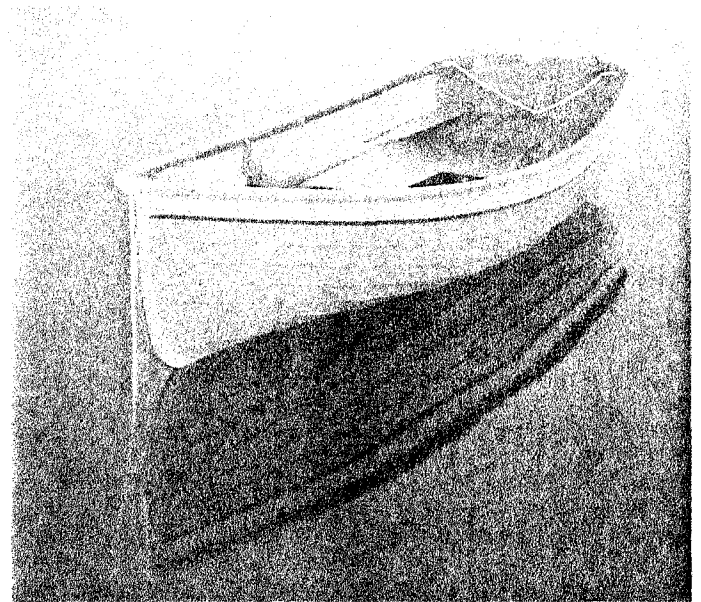


were powered by steam and a canopy covered the open craft while others were human powered such as pedaling



side paddlewheels. Families and friends used these little boats for picnics and other get togethers.

And last, but not least, the humble rowboat was used both commercially and for pleasure.



#### Sources

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*California History: The Magazine of the California Historical Society, Summer 1980 – "From Waterways to Roadways in the Sacramento Delta"* by John Thompson

*The Pacific Historian – Vol. 25, No 1, Spring 1981 "The Ferry System of the Lower Sacramento River"* by John Thompson

*"The Tule Breakers"* by Edward Dutra & John Thompson

*"Through the Sacramento Valley: Sacramento Northern"* by Ira L. Swett

*Oral History: William Nelson Lindsay Hutchinson, Sr.*  
*Oral History: Robert Heringer*

*Recollections: William H. Barry*  
*Recollections: Roland Lauritzen*  
*Recollections: Russell G. Graham, Jr.*





**Excerpt from "Golden Nuggets" the newsletter of the  
"Sacramento County Historical Society:"**

The Sacramento County Historical Society, the Sacramento Old City Association (SOCA), the Sacramento Trust for Historic Preservation and the California State Railroad Museum Foundation—with the support of California State Parks and the City of Sacramento—have jointly submitted an application for a newly designated "Transcontinental Railroad Terminus and Shops Historic District" to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The site was the location of the 1863 groundbreaking for the transcontinental railroad. Seven remaining historic structures were at the core of what was once the largest single-site, integrated industrial complex in the west of the Mississippi River. One of them, the Erecting Shop—still used to repair and rebuild Railroad Museum locomotives—is the only existing Transcontinental Railroad-related structure in the West dating from 1869, the railroad's completion year.

It was less expensive to build new and rehabilitate rolling stock nearer their area of business than to export and import from the Midwest and East. The Southern Pacific as a result became among the most innovative in locomotive car design.

**RESOURCE CENTER NEWS**

.. Does anyone have old editions of the "Delta Current" or old Directories of the Delta they would like to donate to the Center? We would like to add to our collection.

We are recording donated items in our data base – many collections are done, but many still need to be entered. **Would you like to help?** We work almost every Tuesday from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and need people to enter data (it's already handwritten and just needs to be typed.) Please call Bobbie at 777-6792 or Esther at 777-2227 to make sure we will be there and join us.

**SRDHS 2009 SCHEDULE**

- January 20.....General Meeting/Annual Potluck
- February 17.....Board Meeting
- March 17.....General Meeting
- April 21.....Board Meeting
- May 19.....General Meeting
- June 16.....Board Meeting
- June Newsletter
- July/August.....Summer Break
- September 15.....General Meeting
- October 20.....Board Meeting
- November 17.....General Meeting
- December.....Board Meeting

December Newsletter

**MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

We would like to thank all those who made memorial contributions to the Sacramento River Delta Historical Society.

**INFORMATION**

Sacramento River Delta Historical Society web site is [srdhs.org](http://srdhs.org). Please view and enjoy the information. If you wish to email the resource center, the email address is [srdhs@riverdeltawireless.com](mailto:srdhs@riverdeltawireless.com).

**DO YOU WANT TO CONTINUE TO RECEIVE  
THIS GREAT PUBLICATION???**

*Then make sure you pay your 2009 dues –  
Use this form or one of our handy dues envelopes*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

- I'm paying Annual dues for the following year(s):
  - 2009                       Other \_\_\_\_\_
 \$25.00 a year for Annual Membership
- I've enclosed \$150 to become a Lifetime Member
- I'd like to register as an Honorary Member – Free to members 80 years and older

Please mail this form with a check payable to SRDHS to:

SRDHS Membership  
 P.O. Box 293, Walnut Grove, CA 95690

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\*The Sacramento River Delta Historical Society publishes the Sacramento River Delta Society Newsletter twice a year.