

About the Delta

The Beginning

Indians had lived in the historic California Delta for centuries when the Spaniards first found it in 1772. The region was heavy from spring rains and from their view atop Mount Diablo they thought it to be a huge inland lake. French trappers arrived in 1832, and mountain men like Jedidiah Smith trekked its high ground. But it was the discovery of gold on the American River in Coloma in 1848 that hastened the reclamation and settlement of the Delta. Starting in '49, paddlewheeler steamboats brought Argonauts to the fledgling waterfront towns of Sacramento and Stockton, who then went overland to the mines. The California Gold Rush was on. History was in the making.

History records that some men disillusioned by their unsuccessful quest for gold, saw gold of another sort if the rich swamplands of the California Delta could be protected from inundation. The first crude levees were built by hand in the early 1850s, but most of them held for no more than a season or two. In the 1870s, the clamshell dredge was developed. It could take solid bottom mud ("slickens") from the waterway bottoms and deposit it ashore to construct levees of some substance. The California Delta's reclamation pace soon quickened and by the 1930s it was considered complete. Over 550,000 acres on some 55 man-made islands had been brought to the plow. (But alas, there was no moment in history in which they stopped and looked back at the project and declared, "Boys, reclamation of the Delta is now declared complete.")

Steamboat service between Sacramento, Stockton and San Francisco was convenient and comfortable in that time in history. At one time or another, over 300 paddlewheeler steamboats sloshed their way through Delta waters. During the wet season, it was possible to steam up the San Joaquin River to as far as the outskirts of Fresno, and up the Sacramento River to above Red Bluff. Paddlewheeler pilots would take shortcuts across flooded islands, in what they referred to as "wheatfield navigation."

The Transcontinental Railroad made history when it was completed in 1869 (the actual final link was the completion of a railroad drawbridge at Mossdale), freeing a work force of



This photo was sent in by John, and is of a 40' Lauren. It is one of the only (possibly the only) operating sternwheel steamboats on the Delta.

some 12,000 persons. Many of them were Chinese who settled in the California Delta to help with levee construction, farming, cannery work, and other chores. Their contribution was great and they left an indelible mark on the history of the California Delta. Chinatowns became an established part of most every river town and city in this area.

By the 1920s, the automobile had arrived. There was a flurry of ferry construction (in one swoop, San Joaquin County installed 18 cable drawn ferries) and bridge-building. Although there had long been ferries in the Delta to take folks on foot or horseback, and horse-drawn wagons and buggies across the waterways, the ferries now also had to be constructed to handle automobiles and trucks. The horse-drawn buggies and wagons were fast being relegated to history. The Lauritzen brothers established what had to be the most exciting of the ferries when they established ferry service from Antioch to Sherman Island. After only a few years, their ferry was replaced by the first Antioch Bridge, a giant lift bridge that in its up position could clear the Stockton bound freighters.

The railroads, which had proven to be tough competition for the steamboats, by the 1930s were finding formidable competition from the refrigerated trucks that could haul Delta produce more conveniently and for less money. By the 1930s, steamboat activity in the Delta was about finished — two of the last of the historic breed, the handsome Stockton built Delta King and Delta Queen (launched in 1927) sternwheelers were taken out of regular service just prior to WWII. The Delta King serves as an elegant restaurant and inn at Old Sacramento, while the Delta Queen sloshes along quite ably in the Mississippi River system.

Fishing and boating had always been a favored pastime for Deltaphiles. After WWII, Californians began to discover the Delta's recreational possibilities. The regular waterway dredging for levee maintenance, also deepened the waterways, making it possible for deep-draft cruisers to explore the off-beat waterways of the Delta sloughs, rivers and channels. The Stockton Deepwater Channel was completed in 1933, and since then freighters from around the world have been calling on the Port of Stockton. The dug Sacramento Ship Channel was completed in 1963, firmly establishing the Port of Sacramento (located in West Sacramento) in the shipping business. Channels for both of these ports have been further deepened so the ports could handle larger ships.

Pioneers in the California Delta recreation business who made their mark in the history books and still have second- and third-generation family members toiling in the Delta today include Korth's Pirates Lair, Perry's Boat Harbor, Vieira's Resort, and the Andronico

family at Frank's Marina on Bethel Island. Another pioneer family, Bruno Giovannoni (of Bruno's Yacht Harbor on Andrus Island) has a grandson today who is a windsurfing aficionado and part owner in Windcraft on Sherman Island, and he sells Delta real estate. Vestiges of the California Delta's vibrant history are not difficult to find today. Museums, large and small are found here and there. Five ferries still exist and may be ridden on free. Drawbridges 50 to 100 years old still function. Beautiful old homes, carefully restored, can be viewed, especially along the Sacramento River.

The Lauritzens — Delta Pioneers.



The late Christian Lauritzen, aboard the beloved family tugboat Margaret Lauritzen. He was born on Woods Island in 1882 and died in 1973 at age 91.

Lauritzen Yacht Harbor, located in Antioch on the south side of the San Joaquin River downstream of the Antioch Bridge, just celebrated its 40th birthday in 1999. But the Lauritzen family has deep roots in boating in the Delta and the marina is owned and operated by third-generation family members, brother and sister Margaret Lauritzen-Lane and Christian (Chris) Lauritzen III.

In earlier times the Lauritzen Transportation Co. ran a fleet of passenger boats on regular schedules picking up passengers at landings throughout the Delta region. They helped tame the Delta. When the new-fangled automobile became prolific, Lauritzens helped make the Delta accessible by operating a car ferry between Antioch and Sherman Island. The ferry service thrived until in 1926 when it was replaced by the first Antioch Bridge, a lift-type drawbridge. Lauritzens went on to operate tugboats, barges, cranes and other heavy equipment on the river. In fact it was a Lauritzen tugboat that towed the purloined paddlewheeler Delta King from Stockton to Sacramento back in 1969, with Chris II at the wheel and Chris III onboard as a roustabout.

Chris has long been a volunteer reserve member of the Contra Costa Sheriff Water Patrol, and a strong advocate of boating safety. The marina Website, www.lauritzens.com, is heavy with useful information on boating, including the best weather information of any site in the Delta. The marina has open and covered berthing, dry-boat storage, pumpout, launching, fuel (regular and premium), and other facilities. They open early in the morning here to accommodate anglers going out after the big



Part of the Lauritzen Transportation Co. fleet at its Antioch wharf, about