

YERBA BUENA ISLAND

(Summary by Esther Harlan)

Indian relics and cemeteries found on the San Francisco Bay island now known as Yerba Buena give no clue to the character of the primitive people who left them there; it had been abandoned long before the Spanish, exploring the bay in 1775, called it Isla de los Alcatraces (Island of the Pelicans); When American ships began to use the port, the name had been transferred to another bay island, nearer the shore of Yerba Buena Cove. It was from an aromatic herb, used for medicinal purposes, growing profusely on that beach that the cove's name had been derived. Yerba Buena Island, landmark of the San Francisco Bay region's exploration, settlement and growth, is today a part of the great engineering feat which has spanned the bay. The island has been tunneled and connects the east and west sections of the bay bridge.

Little use of the island was made by either Spanish or Mexicans, other than to cut timber from it. In 1842-1843, resident Americans obtained permission from the alcalde of Yerba Buena settlement to raise goats there and for years thereafter it was known only as Goat Island - that name being officially confirmed in 1895.

The federal government retained possession of the

island for defense purposes despite numerous claims made to its title by early settlers during that hectic period of land litigation when ownership of almost every acre of Alta California was disputed. One of the most noted of these claims was that made by José Yves Limantour, in 1853, including all the bay islands, a large tract now the heart of San Francisco, and a part of Marin County. The claim was confirmed in 1856 by the local land commission, but appeal to the United States District Court reversed the decision, in 1858; the grants were rejected as forgeries, and Goat Island remained a federal possession. In the late 1860's details of infantry were stationed there, and in the 1870's an artillery detachment. Later, a fire destroyed the barracks and the place was vacated.

About that time, the Central Pacific Railroad made repeated efforts to get possession of the island as a terminal for its transcontinental service. A bill to that end was bitterly debated in congress and finally defeated. California's first Arbor Day celebration (1886) was made the occasion of an extensive tree planting program on Goat Island. Throughout its higher sections, hundreds of seedlings were set out by school children and others, with ceremonies led by Joaquín Miller. Adolph Sutro donated a large consignment of young trees.

On April 12, 1898, President McKinley designated

a part of the island as a naval training station. Captain Henry Glass's training ship, Pensacola, was anchored there the next year. By February, 1900, barracks were completed, and in 1903 several hundred men were in training there. This station was later transferred to San Diego.

Since the early 1870's the idea of a bridge across the bay had been talked of from time to time, with Goat Island as a central pier. But not until the 1920's did such plans take any constructive form. With the coöperation of a naval commission, preliminary surveys were made and details worked out carefully for several years after official consent to right-of-way across the island had been obtained. The tunnel constructed through its crown has the largest bore in the world - fifty-eight feet in height and 540 feet in length. Some 400 acres will be added to the island's area along the shoals on its northwest shore, where the grounds for the 1939 exposition will be located and where, later, a municipal airport will be established.

In 1931, the island's name was again officially changed to Yerba Buena.

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YERBA BUENA ISLAND

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Yerba Buena! Good herb! A romantic name which reaches back into the past and brings just a breath of early history into the busy work-a-day world. In the bustle of a steel and concrete economy, it recalls to mind that which is apt to be forgotten, the heritage of former days - calm days in which the full flavor of life was savored. Lying in San Francisco Bay, a little Yerba Buena Island watched unmoved the flowering of three cultures - aboriginal American, Spanish American and Anglo American. The first two did not bother the islet to any great degree, but the third shook it from its eternal calm and is changing its very face.

In the pre-history days of California, the island, evidently, was used by the natives; in exactly what connection is unknown. Whether it was the dwelling place of some forgotten tribe or whether it was a sacred isle of long-lost ritual can not be determined. It might have been either, but the Indian cemeteries which have been found there do not give a clue. They tell only one fact; that it was used in some connection with native life. From evidence which has been discovered it is extremely probable that it was used

as a fishing station by the inhabitants of the bay area.¹
 In all events, after the Spaniards appeared upon the shores of the bay, they left no record of its being inhabited. It must therefore be surmised that the natives, for some reason, had abandoned any connection with the island by 1769.

In 1775, the Spanish government decided upon a thorough coast-wise exploring expedition. One of the objectives was to be the complete exploration of San Francisco Bay, and, in August, Ayala coned his ship through the rocky headlands which later were to bear the name of the Golden Gate. In connection with his other work, he and his lieutenants gave to the islands in the bay two names which have been preserved to the present time; one was Nuestra de los Angeles (Our Lady of the Angels) and another Isla de los Alcatrazes (Island of the Pelicans). This latter title was the first one given by the Spaniards to the island later known as Yerba Buena. In some way which is not clear, the name became that of a third islet in the bay, Alcatraz Island.² Just when the name Yerba Buena began to be applied to the island now called Yerba Buena is not known although it was so called when the first ships from the United

1. N. E. Boyes, The legend of Yerba Buena, 12.

2. C. E. Chapman, A history of California: the Spanish Period, 279-280.

States began to ply their trade in California. The name itself, which was first applied to the little settlement growing up on the shore of the peninsula, has an interesting origin. As one authority said;³

Between what was later Clark and Rincon points, there was a cove or crescent at the head of which, where later was the junction of Montgomery and Sacramento streets, was a little lagoon, lake, or arm of the bay, on whose borders grow a kind of mint, the seeds of which were supposed to have been accidentally (sic) dropped there by the sailors who used to land in this cove long before there was any human habitation. The people prized the herb for its medicinal properties, and gathered and dried it for family use.

Practically, the island did the Spaniards and Mexicans little or no good except to act as a marker to guide vessels into the harbor. Captains of entering ships have probably used it for that purpose ever since the first vessels sailed through the gateway. Captain Beechey of England, in 1827, however, set down on charts the bearings to be used.⁴ In another way, the island was helpful to the ships which called at San Francisco Bay; it served as a convenient place to cut wood. Richard Henry Dana in his famous

3. H. H. Bancroft, California pastoral, 725.

4. F. W. Beechey, Narrative of a voyage to the Pacific and Bering's strait II, 426-427.

volume Two years before the mast mentioned that activity on the islet. William Heath Davis, one of the earliest American residents in Alta California, also recounts that he cut wood on Yerba Buena Island. Incidentally he dwells on the ease with which fish could be taken in large quantities and the delights of the duck hunting. In ten days he was able to catch enough fish and ducks so as to be able to dry a good quantity for his friends on the mainland.⁵

It was because of the resident citizens of the United States that Yerba Buena Island later received the less elegant name of Goat Island.⁶

In 1842 or '43 Spear and Fuller having obtained possession of five or six goats from Captain Nye, of the ship Fame, placed them upon Yerba Buena Island, by permission of the alcalde. They found subsistence there, multiplied rapidly, and in 1848 and '49 amounted to several hundred. From this circumstance the place derived its name of Goat Island.

After the gold rush had begun, some of the travelers across the bay considered it fine sport to shoot at the goats which scampered over the island. The toll taken was so heavy that the number of the animals declined rapidly. Spear and Fuller posted notices in the newspapers, for-

5. W. H. Davis, Seventy-five years in California,.... 76-78.
6. W. H. Davis, Sixty years in California,... 266.

bidding shooting and trespassing, but they failed to have any effect. Finally, nearly all of the goats were killed by the ambitious marauders.

Such small happenings composed the history of Yerba Buena Island before the Americans conquered California in 1846 and 1847. With the occupation by the United States, a more exciting period began.

Together with certain other lands, Yerba Buena Island was reserved by the United States government for defense purposes. Almost immediately, the island became an object of land claims on the part of various persons. The history of the hectic period of land litigation in California was involved and deserved the many pages which have been written about it. Almost every part of Alta California entered the courts at one time or another, either to have title verified or as an object of controversy, and Yerba Buena Island was no exception. Of the many, the case of Jose Yves Limantour may be taken as the most famous example. Limantour made claim in 1853 to a large tract of land - which included what is now the heart of San Francisco as well as Yerba Buena, Alcatraz and the Farrallones Islands, and a tract in Marin County. The land commission confirmed his claim in 1856. When the case came up on appeal in the United States District Court, in 1858, each point was rejected with vigor and the grants themselves labeled as forgeries. Thus

Yerba Buena remained without owner except for the United States government.⁷

It was not long after the settlement of the Limantour claim that the government manifested an interest in the island. A small detail of infantry was ordered to take post there in the late 1860's. In a very short time after the first detachment went to live on Yerba Buena, a second larger detail, including some men from the Engineer Corps, was ordered there. About 1870, the infantry was withdrawn, its place being taken by an artillery detachment. A fire soon destroyed the buildings, which caused abandonment except as a storage depot.⁸

At the same time, there was going on a controversy which brought the little island into the limelight of public notice; it was the action of the Central Pacific Railroad in its endeavors to secure a terminal around the bay of San Francisco. The Central Pacific had been considering for some time the question of the terminal for transcontinental service. Several locations were examined but the choice finally fell on Yerba Buena Island.

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7. J. S. Hittell, The Limantour claim as it appears in October 1857; T. H. Hittell, History of California III, 697-699.
 8. F. A. Hunt, "Yerba Buena Island naval training station," in Overland monthly, XLII:1, 65-66; Boyes, Legend, 8.

The directors of the company did want to anger anyone more than was unavoidable. They were especially anxious to avoid antagonizing San Francisco. Therefore, they made their moves cautiously. In 1869-1870 there was introduced into Congress a bill which would give Yerba Buena Island to the Railroad Company for its terminal. This move was necessary, of course, because the island was government property. Even though a petition containing the names of twenty-two senators was sent to the California congressmen approving the bill, San Francisco, as soon as the news was learned, rose to arms. The citizens of the bay city were afraid that with causeways built from Oakland to the island and with the latter leveled off, a rival city would rise which would destroy San Francisco and its harbor.

Because of strenuous efforts on the part of San Francisco, the bill was defeated in congress. The evidence produced to stop action ran the gamut from petitions drawn up by citizens' meetings to statements of the United States Military Engineers about what they thought would happen to the tides if solid causeways were built from the Oakland shore to the island. The Railroad Company did not give up hope for some time, but nothing ever came of their plan for Yerba Buena.⁹

9. Bancroft, California, VII, 581, 601-604; Hittell, California, 489-492; A. A. Sargent and J. M. Coghlan, Yerba Buena Island; remarks of Hon. Aaron A. Sargent and Hon. John M. Coghlan, of California, delivered in the House of Representatives April 23, 1872.

When, in 1886, Joaquin Miller promoted California's Arbor Day, Yerba Buena figured most prominently in the ceremonies. Across the top of the island a plot of ground in the shape of a Greek cross was prepared for planting, which was done by school children and many prominent citizens around the bay. Adolph Sutro sent an entire consignment of trees to be planted. The reforestation continued from time to time; in the year 1904, United States Navy records disclosed that 6,000 new plants were set out.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, war clouds began to gather on the political horizon of the United States. One of the first things noticed was the lack of properly trained personnel for navy recruiting. It was decided that there should be a training station on the Pacific coast for teaching apprentices and that its location should be on Yerba Buena Island. Therefore, on April 12, 1898, President McKinley set aside a portion of the island for the site of a naval training station. In about a year, plans began to take visible shape and on March 25, 1899, Captain Henry Glass brought his training ship, Pensacola, from Mare Island navy yard and anchored in the night before Goat Island (its name had been changed officially to Goat Island in 1895). There were just five apprentices on board.

Building went on apace at the station, for by Febru-

ary, 1900, the barracks were occupied. Also, the parade ground necessitated considerable excavating. The establishment was a success from the beginning and in three years the number of trainees had grown from the modest start of five to 584. There the Pacific Coast naval training school remained until finally the facilities were no longer adequate for the demand put upon them. Then the school was moved to
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 San Diego.

The thought of a bridge across San Francisco Bay, possibly, has entered the minds of numberless men, long ago and at present. And, probably, in most such nebulous plans Goat Island or Yerba Buena was considered as the central pier. Especially did the matter break into print in the early 1870's when the Central Pacific was making its bid for the island. Since that time, talk of a bridge has seldom died down. Finally talk and propaganda crystallized, and in the 1920's the plans became a reality. There were, of course for such a huge undertaking, many preliminary surveys made before even the path of the bridge was chosen. Examples of the matters which had to be taken into consideration were

10. There are two satisfactory accounts of the naval station: Hunt, Yerba Buena Station, and D. White, "Boy Blue Jackets of Yerba Buena," in Sunset, XI: 6, 517-525.

the relation of the bridge to military defense of the harbor, to navel plans, and to ship traffic. After these details had been worked out with the aid of a naval commission, permission had to be obtained to a right of way across Yerba Buena Island. (The name was rechanged from Goat Island to Yerba Buena in 1931.)

Finally, with plans completed and approved, construction began. The calm of the little island was broken for good and all because the plans called for a change in its physical makeup. To avoid a more circuitous route over the high peak, a tunnel was constructed through it. After emergence, the bridge was carried over the remainder of the island on steel trusses supported on land piers. The tunnel has the largest bore in existence, being fifty-eight feet high and 540 feet in length. In one more way the island will be changed: it is to have its size increased by some 400 acres. This addition is to be on the northwest shoals where the fair grounds for the 1939 exposition will be located, and where later will be situated a municipal airport. ¹¹

Thus comes to an end for the present the history of

11. E. C. Mensch, San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge; Report of the Hoover-Young San Francisco Bay bridge commission....

the little island. What its future will be is hard to fore-
tell. As a main point along the bridge arterial from the
East Bay to San Francisco, its setting is that of a swift
and pulsing new era. How different from the slow and easy
days of the past!

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