



Collinsville Opium Raid

by Phil Pezzaglia

Most of the past articles that I have written concern people and events that have taken place in the immediate vicinity of Rio Vista. This week I would like to venture through the Montezuma Hills to the small town of Collinsville.

The story that I am about to relate sounds more like a present-day raid rather than an event that took place some 123 years ago, in a small fishing town.

This was an era when the business section of a town was made up of blacksmiths, general merchandise stores and saloons. Rio Vista, Isleton, Walnut Grove, and Collinsville all had large populations of Chinese residents. It was during this era that the Chinese inhabitants usually ran the laundries and worked in the fishing industry, and that is what they did in the small town of Collinsville.

For quite some time the local Collinsville Constables, W.C. Jones and Harmon, had suspected that some of the Chinese residents were preparing opium for smoking and sales. The constables had contacted additional officers in Solano County to help with their investigation.

After a time of surveillance and of gathering evidence, the officers were ready to make an arrest.

It was a calm evening in late September of 1894, when the two constables along with the additional officers from the county laid in wait for their impending raid. The local Chinese washhouse was silent. As the officers approached they saw two individuals exiting the building, both carrying large sacks. The officers moved in quickly and surrounded the two men. The constables identified themselves and asked that the sacks be opened. The contents of the bags were five cans containing opium. The two individuals were detained while the other officers quickly entered the house, finding three gentlemen busily preparing the crude material, presumably for commercial purposes. The entire room was outfitted with equipment for cooking opium.

It seemed that the opium factory had been in operation for several months. On the outside, it looked as if it were just a washhouse, a laundry, and no one was any the wiser as to what was going on in the back room, right under the town's noses.

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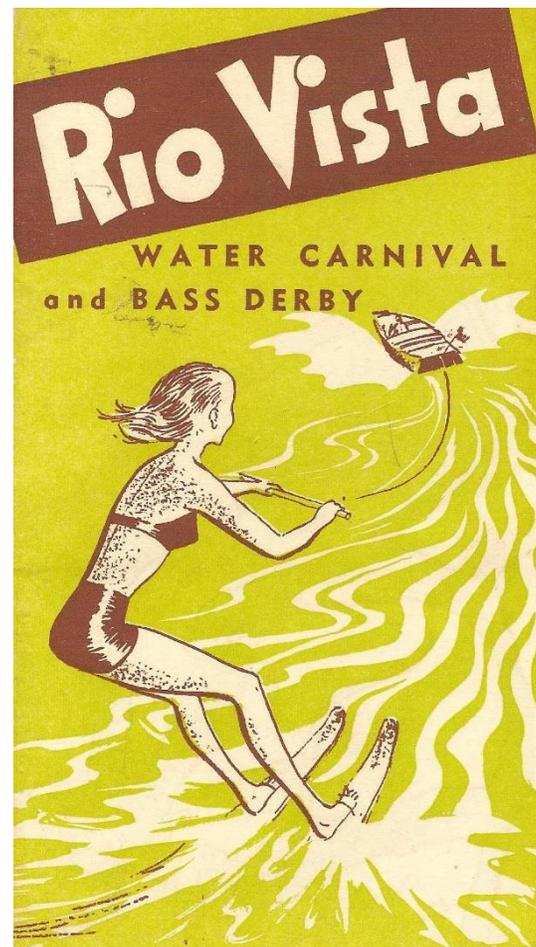
*Come visit the museum
during Bass Derby!*

October 13, 14, & 15

Friday: 5 pm – 9 pm

Saturday: 10 am – 9 pm

Sunday: noon – 4:30 pm



Rio Vista and the Sacramento River

Their Early Days

by Zack Meers

The following was written by Zack Meers in 1995 when he was in 5th grade. Thank you, Zack, for allowing us to reprint this paper. We hope that today's students are learning about the history of their hometown. And we urge local teachers and parents to bring their students to the museum.

The early history of the land that we now call Rio Vista started in 1844. A citizen of Mexico named General John Bidwell went to Governor Micheltorena and petitioned for a land grant. He wanted land on the Sacramento River. When his grant came through, it was for 17,724 acres of land. He started to build up the area. When a carpenter, James Marshall, set off the most frenzied gold rush in the history of the world in 1848, John Bidwell realized that he could use the Sacramento River to move massive amounts of supplies. They would be needed for all of the people coming into this area to find gold. John Bidwell built a wharf on the Sacramento River so the river steamers bringing in the supplies would have a place to dock and drop off cargo and people.

The first steam vessel on the Sacramento River was the *Sitka* which left San Francisco on November 28, 1847, and arrived in Sacramento on December 4, 1847. This steam vessel paved the way for the hundreds of paddle wheelers that would be coming up and down the Sacramento River after the discovery of the gold. There were some steamers that would start in New York or Boston and travel all the way to Rio Vista. They had to brave the winds of the Pacific and slowly crawl their way north. By the end of 1850 there were 28 steamers, 23 barks, 19 brigs and 21 brigantines on the Sacramento River. The price of a trip between San Francisco and Sacramento was about \$10 which included only the fare with a cabin. Meals and liquor were additional and any freight went for \$8 a ton.

In 1855, a year after Mexico signed California over to the United States, a man named Colonel Davis bought land from General John Bidwell. Colonel Davis picked a site for a town in 1857,

which was four miles upriver from Rio Vista's present location, at the junction of Cache Slough and the Sacramento River. He named the town Los Brazos Del Rio which means "the arms of the river." The name fit because where the town was built is where the Sacramento River formed.

The first home to be built was Colonel Davis's. It was built in 1858. After his home was built, many buildings started going up. They had a storehouse, butcher shop, hotel, blacksmith shop, general store, drug store and a livery stable. In 1860 the townspeople renamed their little town Rio Vista which means "Riverview."

In the winter of 18+1, the town had a rainstorm that lasted for 40 days. The storm was so bad it washed away the town of Rio Vista. The people of Rio Vista only escaped with their lives. They lost everything they owned. When the people decided to rebuild, they moved their little Cache Slough settlement to its present location which was on higher ground. The rebuilding of Rio Vista in its new location began in 1862.

One of the biggest tragedies in the history of Rio Vista was an explosion in 1864. The explosion was on a steamer, the *Yosemite*, which was docked at the wharf. It was one of the many steamers that were traveling the river on the San Francisco to Sacramento run. Because the pioneers were flocking to northern California for the gold rush, the steamer was packed. There were over 300 passengers packed onto the decks of the riverboat and a "cargo" of Chinese laborers below deck. The *Yosemite* was just leaving the wharf when an explosion ripped the ship apart. One hundred passengers were killed instantly and another fifty died within hours.

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Museum Notes

- Thanks to all who helped make this year's Hamburger BBQ a great success. Thank you to the Rio Vista–Isleton Portuguese Club for the use of their hall and a big thanks to Lira's for their continuing support. And thanks, as always, to those who contributed baked goods and those who helped cook and serve.
- SAVE THE DATES! This year's Old Tyme Christmas Faire will take place on Saturday and Sunday, December 2nd and 3rd. We have many returning vendors as well as a few new ones. As always, we look forward to offering lots of tasty treats at the Bake Sale.
- WANTED: Pictures and information about the local gas wells.
- WANTED: Rio Vista special recipes from old community cookbooks; specifically, recipes for Riverview cinnamon buns, duck, and anything that YOU think is special to the community.

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The people of Rio Vista reacted as swiftly as they could, bringing victims ashore and caring for them. None of the Chinese laborers survived. They were placed in a grave in the city cemetery, which is now one of the city's parks. Many years later the grave they were buried in was made into a memorial cemetery and the headstones turned flat.

Another event in Rio Vista history was a fire in 1892. This fire destroyed most of the town. It destroyed every business building from Front Street to Third Street and from Montezuma Street to Sacramento Street. When the alarm went out about the fire, they found out the water system was outmoded and the north wind, which Rio Vista is well known for, fanned the wooden building into an inferno. People from Isleton and all the surrounding farms rushed to Rio Vista to help battle the flames. The people of Rio Vista would have to rebuild their little river town again.

The house was in fact a full-blown opium factory. The constables found a large portion of the drug prepared and placed in tin cans, ready for distribution. Each can had been labeled. In fact, labels and gum shellac, used to paste the labels on the cans, were also found on the premises. It was a much bigger operation than any of the officers had been expecting.

Thus, being such a big news story in these parts, and word getting around very quickly, it was in fact the main topic of conversation on every one's lips, the next day.

The reporter for the *Sacramento River News* (which was eventually renamed the *River News-Herald*) at the time could look inside the washhouse and view the opium factory. The following is his description of what he saw: "There were two earthen furnaces in use, about the size of a small wash tub, which were made especially for the purpose, and a third furnace which had never been used. Each of the two furnaces contained a coke fire still burning, but when I arrived the large copper pans containing the drug had been removed from the furnaces and were sitting on the floor."

After every bit of the drug was accounted for, it was released to the local paper that the value of the opium seized that night was valued at \$3000. However, another report listed it as being valued at hundreds of dollars. Either way that was a lot of money for 1894.

The outcome of that September evening was that Constable Jones arrested two of the gentlemen for the manufacturing of opium, "contrary to the statute in such case made and provided." They were brought before Judge Rice, who placed \$500 bonds on each one after which they were then delivered to the federal authorities.

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*Come see one of the museum's
newest exhibits!*

We sometimes take travel for granted in our fast-paced 21st century lives. Many of us, however, remember those days when flying meant dressing up in our fancy clothes. In an even earlier era, trips might involve trains or ships – and many days.

Thanks to Nora Crane, Janet Blegen, Mary Anne Peterson, and Dana Lapp who have been working on this new exhibit which looks at travel in a bygone time.

Stop by during the Bass Derby Festival or any weekend to see the new displays and the old. There's always something to discover or to rediscover at your museum.

Rio Vista Museum
16 N. Front Street
Rio Vista, CA 94571