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Fronting on San Pablo Bay (the north end of The Bay of San Francisco), Sonoma County has its shoulder to world commerce.

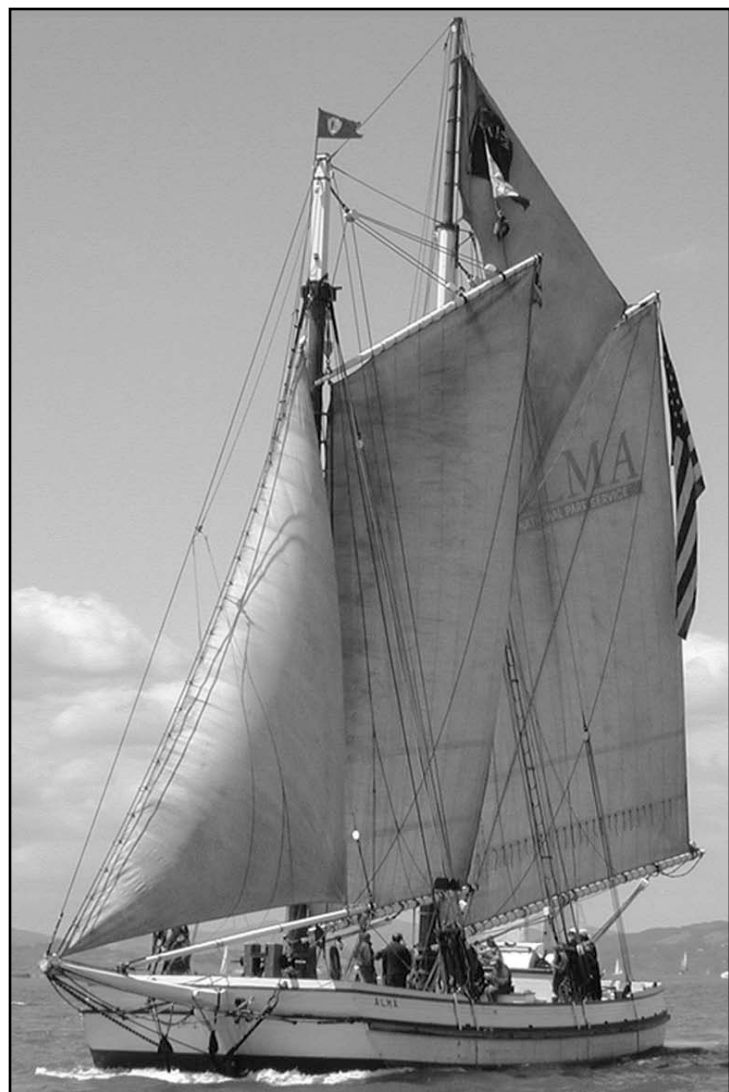
The Petaluma Valley estuary leading from the bay was known as Petaluma Creek in 1850. It was navigable for sizable craft with flat bottoms for 18 miles inland. This fact alone attracted the agriculturist, the merchant, the adventurer, the gold miner and the sailor. It was the beginning of very exciting times.

Bear, elk, deer, wild boar, and all sorts of winged game were prevalent on this river. The tables of San Francisco and Sacramento were stacked

with Sonoma game brought there by sail and steam via Petaluma Creek.

As the commerce became more active, wooden shanties appeared along the creek. Hotels were in place by the early 1860s. Blacksmithing shops, tanneries, warehouses, small foundries and mills for flour and grain were well stocked.

The Petaluma waterfront housed quite a tough bunch. The year was 1854, only five years past the gold rush of '49. Those who came West were adventurers who traveled at peril of desert, Indians, wild animals, and men of evil ways. They had to be a tough bunch. They were the survivors of an incredible move-



The Alma is the last remaining scow schooner to ply the Petaluma River / Photo by Tom Corbett

# STORIES FROM THE PAST

## 101 Years on the Petaluma River

by History Editor Skip Sommer

ment of humanity never seen in America since the Revolution.

They brought with them their skills, muscles and guns. These were men of action. Petaluma became the focal point of the most beautiful land they had ever seen. It was a high point for these people because of The Petaluma Creek.

It was 1851 when the first regular boat service started on the creek. It carried trade in wild game. There were a few scattered clapboard cabins at that time. The homesteaders would be coming in droves nearly a year later. The first wharf was built in 1852 and warehouses sprang up around it.

From 1852 on, the scow schooners plied the Petaluma Creek. Captains had to know the territory well. It was estimated that there were more than eighty course changes along that 18-mile creek. By 1852, the steamer Red Jacket was making three trips a week to San Francisco carrying every manner of agricultural product down the river and ferrying families or homesteaders back up the river.

The stagecoach line to Sonoma was started in 1854. Petaluma had, by then, become the main depot for shipping from Mendocino, Napa, and Sonoma Counties.

In 1857, a drawbridge was built across Petaluma Creek at Washington Street. That allowed East Petaluma to come into what would (the next year) become the city limits. This bridge eventually became the head of navigation from the sea.

Within only seven years, Petaluma had become organized. By 1856, it had a board of trustees, churches, schools, a fire department, and all of the various merchants needed for a thriving hamlet.

In 1864, the terrible Civil War was raging in the East and South. Northern sympathizers were welcomed into Petaluma. One year later, the board of trustees instituted a local tax for the purpose of creek improvement. Word was received that same night about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The town was stunned. The nation was stricken. The board of trustees voted to wear black crepe for thirty days in honor of the fallen president. Stores were closed and a funeral service and procession was held on the Main Street of Petaluma.

On the Creek, they discovered that if the ship was powered by steam, it was possible to blow it up. Many steamers suffered this fate on the Petaluma River. There were numerous collisions in fog and many craft were run aground. River transport was no sure thing and the risks were plentiful. Sinkings were a double trouble on the narrow creek. The first wreck often caused a second and removing them from the mud was a Herculean task. The city hired Chinese labor to deepen and widen the creek.

In 1864, the Petaluma and Haystack Railroad was opened to cover the last two and a half miles to the city - the stretch most difficult to navigate by boat. The railroad ran for two years until the engine exploded killing several people. For the next nine years, the train was pulled by mules.

Merchandise was shipped from Petaluma well into the 1900's. Grain, hay, lumber, fruit, butter, eggs, cattle, horses, and chicks were the main cargo. In 1908, there were still 31 schooners plying the river. Flat-bottomed scow schooners like the Alma were perfect for the shallow water.

By the 1930's, though, the motor vehicle had taken its toll on river traffic and the commercial river traffic dwindled. The stern-wheeler Petaluma made her final run in 1950. It had been one hundred years of active river life - and the Petaluma's final voyage was a sad day. Change is inevitable, they say. But many of us would love to see the Petaluma River filled with activity again.



The Steamer Gold on the Petaluma River / ©Petaluma Museum Society