

The S.S. Vallejo: A Voyage through California Bay Area's Alternative History

by Michael Gaio
for Erik Davis (CIIS)
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Thus, I have come to live right on the edge of the water. I have a studio, library, a place for writing on an old ferryboat tied up on the waterfront of Sausalito, north of San Francisco. I suppose this place is the nearest thing in America to a Mediterranean fishing village. Steep hills clustered with little houses, and below along the rim of the bay a forest of masts rocking almost imperceptively against a background of water and wooded promontories. In some ways this is a rather messy waterfront, not just piers and boats, but junkyards, industrial buildings, and all the inevitable "literature" of our culture. But somehow the land-and-seascape absorbs and pacifies the mess. Sheds and shacks thrown together out of old timbers and plywood, heaps of disused lumber, rusted machinery, and rotting hulls—all of this is transformed in the beneficent presence of the sea.

—Alan Watts, *"Cloud-Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown"*

'Man is water, and when the producing elements of male and female unite, liquid flows into forms.... Hence the solution for the Sage who would transform the world lies in water. ... Hence the Sage, when he rules the world, does not teach men one by one, or house by house, but takes water as his key.'

—Alan Watts, *"Tao: the Watercourse Way"*, quoting Kuan-tzu

'The artist essentially wants to recreate water.'

—Anais Nin quotes Jean Varda in *"A Woman Speaks"*

'There are three perfect shapes in the world ... the hull of a boat, a violin, and a woman's body.'

—Charis Wilson quotes Varda in *"Edward Weston Nudes"*

Afloat upon the shallow bay waters off shore from the city of Sausalito is a vessel that has hosted some of the California Bay Area's most eccentric and alternative historical figures. Without moving anywhere beyond a ripple wake away from the remote mud flats of small Richardson Bay for more than fifty years, the S.S. Vallejo has been inhabited by artists, poets, philosophers, musicians, computer wizards, and many other eccentric types and social outcasts. People such as Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, Janice Joplin, Ram Dass, Timothy Leary, Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Terrence McKenna, and Peter Russell have boarded her deck, and stayed either as residents or guests within her sea-worthy hull.

The ship, over 120 years old, was originally assembled as a steam-powered paddle-wheel ferry in Portland, Oregon. Set afloat upon the Willamette River in 1879, She then found her way to the San Francisco Bay Area (early to mid-1890s) where She became enrolled as an official public transport (1897). She became a popular cruiser during a time when no bridges spanned the waters of the San Francisco Bay. Beginning Her initial route between the city of Vallejo and Mare Island in the North Bay—she carried men, women, children and cargo through more than fifty years of service across the water. Completing her last run in 1948 (over a decade after the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge), the S.S. Vallejo was gutted for valuable materials and then left abandoned for scrap near what is known as the "grave yard" for dead ships of the Bay Area. Here she waited for the second half of her destiny to begin.

According to some residents of the Vallejo today, the vacant vessel was first recognized for its domestic potentials by Greek cubist artist Jean Varda (a friend of Anais Nin) in the late 1940s. During World War II, as many of the local European artists were forced to exile or into hiding out—Varda found the boat, and began "squatting" in free residency below her decks. In 1949, Jean Varda, his artist friend, Gordon Onslow Ford, and architect Forest Wright [or Wolfgang Paalen?] purchased the Vallejo. Turning the vessel into the first "house boat" in the now famous Sausalito waterfront houseboat community—Varda, Ford, and Wright changed the old vessel to suit their lifestyles—converting her from bow to stern into an artist's heaven.

The vessel soon became a hangout and sleepover for many of the local artistic outcasts. Rumor has it that among these people were Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso. It is believed that Arthur Miller visited the Vallejo as one of his first stops in America. Jack Kerouac also partied on the boat. Supposedly, Kerouac built a property fence in a drunken stupor one night (perhaps in a response to the long-standing political conflicts between city officials and the owners of the Vallejo). As Sausalito flourished into a popular hangout for the beatniks, outcasts, loners, eccentrics, and hippies—the boat would continue to be a popular hangout spot and party launching pad for decades to come.

According to fashion designer Tenley Wallace, a current resident aboard the Vallejo—Varda became the focal character during this initial phase of the ship's

history as a party vessel. Aside from exquisite parties on board the Vallejo, Varda threw special parties where all guests wore the "color of the week" while cruising the bay in his fantastic sailing vessel, the "Phenias". Traveling along the shorelines of the Bay Area, public on-lookers would gawk as the monochrome crew of partiers sailed along by. Varda would hail out to them, "Where are we? Have we arrived in San Francisco yet?" and then continue to sail on ... through the Summer of Love and beyond.

In 1961, Gordon Onslow Ford leased his space on the Vallejo to Alan Watts, the Zen Buddhist who eventually founded the "Society for Contemplative Philosophy" on board the ferry. Watts lived in the front of the boat and Varda on the side farthest over the water. Supposedly, at times, Watts would host Buddhist teachings and seminars on the port side, while a party reeled on the starboard side.

The Vallejo would have Her ownership transferred several times through the 1970s, 80s, and 90s before eventually being purchased by Erik Eulich, her current owner. During the 1970s, Eulich was friends with Timothy Leary, who resided in an "A"-frame house just across the mud flat from the Vallejo. From Leary's house, Eulich first saw the boat, and then continued to admire it from his nearby office space for many years. When the boat transferred ownership to Orley Lindgren in the early 1990s, Eulich was able to rent a living space on board.

For Ammon Haggerty, a Vallejoian resident of ten years, Eulich was his link to being brought on board. According to Ammon, Eulich was a brilliant digital technician and Virtual Reality pioneer—very active establishing his leading 3D immersive environment company "Sense8" in the early 1990s. Back in these early days of Internet hype, Ammon was working as a graphic designer for "Yang" snowboarding company. His employers asked him to create a VR snowboarding simulation to showcase at the company demo booth for an upcoming conference. Initially dissuaded by the complexity of the project, Ammon eventually came to meet and work with Eulich to bring this vision of virtuality into reality. Eulich knew how to utilize an already established VR skim-boarding simulation, previously developed by Japanese technicians. All Ammon had to do was swap the skim-board model with that of a snowboard, and the water texture map graphics with that of snow. During the development of this VR project, Eulich was granted a living space onboard the Vallejo; soon afterward, Eulich invited Ammon to move on board as well.

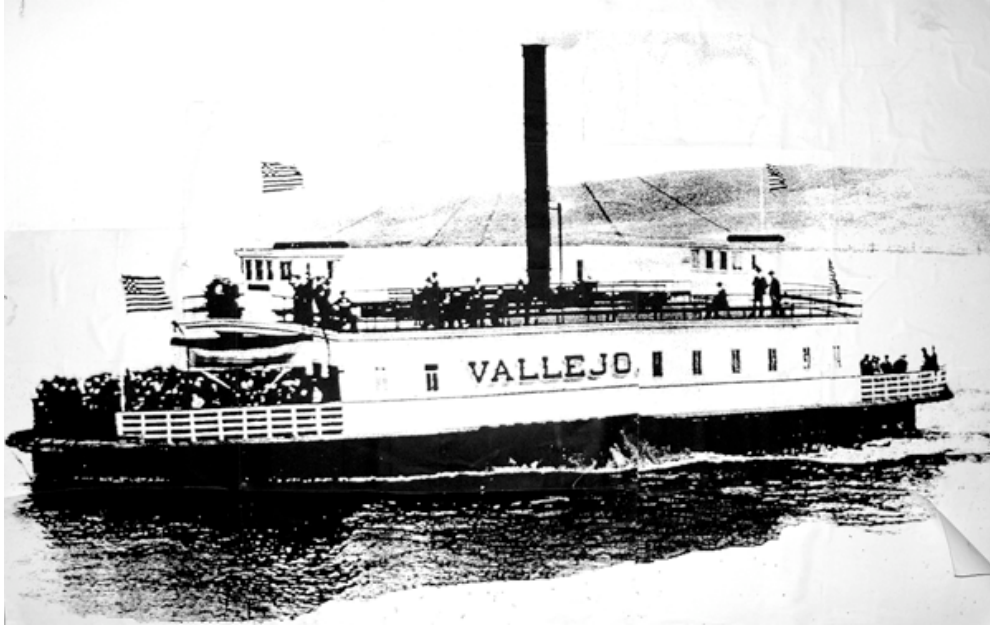
Ammon, now a well acclaimed web designer, technical writer, artist, popular Bay Area DJ, and event producer—earned his sea-legs and helped to rock the boat through this next phase of the mid to late-1990s. According to Ammon, the best remembered event was the infamous "Pajama Party" of 1999. Mixing up a special punch drink with LSD, Ecstasy, and 2-CB—Ammon handed out Dixie cup portions to arriving guests—anticipating a light affect for the small dose. On the contrary, these small doses amounted to a whole lot more. What had been

expected to be a casual ferryboat ride across altered consciousness turned into an epic voyage beyond uncharted psychedelic seas. Induced into craziness by mind-bending hallucinations fused with the best of techno-trance music, it was a night of profound trippiness that many people continue to talk about to this day.

According to Ammon, the ship has sunk three times during the decade that he has lived on board. The first time was when Orley Lindgren, considered by many of the Vallejo's residents to be a rather derelict landlord, owned the boat. One evening, without any warning or regard for the ship's tenants, Orley threw a party for his daughter's sixteenth birthday. Orley expected that his daughter would invite perhaps only a few dozen of her friends. Yet, having hired the popular local area DJ Pollywog to spin music for the party—word got out, and hundreds of Bay Area teenagers arrived on the boat—eventually crowding into a rather drunken bash. When residents of the Vallejo arrived home to the boat dock, they were shocked and upset by the presence and magnitude of the scene. Some threatened to sue Orley on the spot. But Orley allowed the party to continue. And when Orley presented his daughter's birthday cake in one corner kitchen, the sweet attraction drew the staggering mass toward that side of the boat. The sudden shift in weight tipped the Vallejo enough to ground and puncture a hole in the hull, spilling water into Her belly from the bay. As the ship began to sink, Orley panicked. Trying to get control, he pushed back the mob like a herder of callow cats. The bodies bottlenecked at the front door and on the dock—displacing several kids to fall overboard.

Shortly after resolving this incident, Eulich acquired the Vallejo, and began repairing and remodeling the rig. During reconstruction, old photographs, newspapers, ticket stubs, and advertisements for a Jazz record label were found inside the walls. When the wood was removed at the base of one of the pilothouses, a pipe (believed to belong to Alan Watts) was found within the hollow of the wood frame. In May of 1999, Wayne Licina of American Oceanics was hired to give an assessment of the Vallejo's hull. He did the inspection, observing the massive corrosion at the waterline, and remarked, "This boat could go in the Guinness's Book of Records for having the most patches and still floating."

Over the span of her time afloat, the S.S. Vallejo has held masses of people and cargo—both conventional and strange. In the first half of her life, she was hauling people and cargo between physical locations. Over the last few decades, she has been more of a transport of people between conscious realities. As one current Vallejoian resident put it, "She has been a very active boat, both moving and non-moving." And still today, the old vessel buoys steadily upon the surface of calm waters—awaiting Her next voyage into the vortex of conscious exploration.



1890s



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