

NIGHT IN VENICE - A PENINSULA TRADITION

By Dave Gotz



Poster for the "Nights in Venice": July 4-6, 1947.

In the rich history of the Tiburon Peninsula one event rises above all others in its grandeur and endurance. First celebrated in 1894, the "Night in Venice" festival, which has featured lighted boat parades, elaborately decorated residences, open-air concerts and dancing, sail boat races, baseball games, and of course fireworks, was a great success at the close of the 19th century, revived in 1920 and again in the late 1940's and the 1950's. The event was again revived in 1996 as part of the centennial celebrations of the City of Belvedere and in 2011 by the Landmarks Society.

No record can be found regarding the origin or motivation for the event; however, from newspapers of the time Tiburon merchant James G. Hawkins, who was director-general of the festivities in 1894, 1895 and 1899, seems to have been the driving force behind the celebration. Although scheduled for Saturday, June 16th, the 1894 festival was postponed due to bad weather until the following Tuesday.

The June 20th *San Francisco Call* gushed about the festivities of the night before: "Never in the history of Tiburon and Belvedere did the cove present as beautiful a sight as it did last night. The water was as smooth as glass, the air warm and pleasant and the sky overhead like a vault of pale amethyst. It was an ideal 'night in Venice' that the people living on these hills had been longing for...By sundown every ark, yacht, launch, rowboat and residence was covered with some sort of decoration, and the effect produced was such as never before been seen on the lagoon of Belvedere." Over 100 vessels took part in a parade, then fireworks were discharged and "for over an hour the air was filled with streamers of light. Many of the arks spread elaborate suppers for their guests, and the clink of glasses mingled with the sound of laughter and the happiness did not cease until long after midnight."

Such was the success of the first event that the following year it was staged again with "[A]ll the best features...reproduced, but in the main this carnival will be distinguished by the newness and crispness of the ideas." (*S.F. Call*, August 3, 1895). Expecting a massive turnout for the event, special boats were dispatched from the Tiburon ferry landing in San Francisco.

"Never before in the history of the San Francisco and North Pacific Railway has such a crowd congregated in the ferry depot as was ready to take the first boat for the second annual Night in Venice at Belvedere." (*S.F. Call*, August 4, 1895). An estimated 30,000 spectators came to see the events that evening, including California Governor James Budd and other distinguished citizens.

Like the previous year, a parade of decorated boats began the festivities, each burning red and green roman candles as they joined the procession. "The beauty of the scene was startling, and the effect swept over the mighty throng of spectators like a great wave of happiness. Immediately after the parade the pyrotechnic display from Valentines Island [Corinthian after 1907] was begun....Both bands kept up a continuous strain of music, and the arks and houses along the shore were crowded with guests...The little lodges and the big mansions dispensed good cheer, [I]t was beautiful, idyllic and a credit to Belvedere and her people."

Apparently exhausted from the overwhelming success of the event in 1895, Belvedereans allowed four years to pass before mounting another festival. From the start, a "Night in Venice" on September 16, 1899 was conceived to be an event of grandeur and one that might even recoup some of the costs of production. An elaborate 80-page souvenir program was created, and tickets were sold for 5,000 seats in the grandstand on Valentines Island above the Corinthian Yacht Club.

The Third U.S. Artillery band provided the music, which ranged from waltzes and marches to original songs. The Navy anchored two ships

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