

Coastside Chronicles

A Publication of the Half Moon Bay History Association

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Celebrating Coastside Legacies

If you needed a tooth pulled, the blacksmith and his pliers might have been the only game in town.

Connections: Tales from Long Ago and Not So Long Ago

—Patricia Strohlein

What do blacksmiths, saloonkeepers, shipwrecks, and the Blue Lady ghost have in common? They are all part of our rich San Mateo County Coastside history. This issue of the Chronicles highlights the people and innovations that helped shape daily life on the Coast. What is most interesting about the stories on blacksmiths and The Levy Bros. is to see how their early ideas on recycling and commerce very much ring true today. We also include stories that can only happen on our foggy and rugged Coastline. Where else can a ship full of toys that wrecked off the Coast inspire a local artist? And where else can a “haunted” building give a young man life-long stories to tell?

When Blacksmiths Were the Backbone of Coastal Life

—Marc Stohlein

Mention the occupation “blacksmith” and most people immediately conjure up images of a burly man, sweating while hammering a glowing horseshoe on a large anvil.

That’s an apt portrayal but only provides part of the picture of the important role played by those craftsmen. Artisans that shod horses were actually known as farriers, and those who repaired wagon wheels were called wheelwrights. Yet in the early history of the coast, most blacksmiths functioned as “jacks of all trade,” performing any and all tasks that

required metal working, including horseshoeing and wheel repair.

Metal working dates back to the Hittites in Anatolia (in modern day Turkey) as far back as 1550 BC. The site etymonline.com dates the term blacksmith to the late 15th century, citing the Old English *blæc* “the color of soot or coal” as well as numerous derivations meaning burned or scorched. Smith comes from Old English *smið*, meaning “one who works in metal.” Note there are many other possible derivations, as you will find if you search on the term.

The essential tools were a forge, bellows to fan fires, and an anvil, along with tongs, hammers, chisels and leather aprons and gloves to protect from sparks. Blacksmiths were, in many ways, the backbone of life on the San Mateo Coast in the 1800s into the early 1900s.



Source Wikipedia

Horseshoeing was important as horses provided the only viable means for getting produce and goods to market, not to mention traveling outside the immediate confines of homes and towns. Blacksmiths' services were crucial in repairing all manner of machinery including that used for logging, milling, and transportation.

They also made and repaired tools for the home and kitchen including nails, hammers, axes, saws, hinges, locks, and keys. Hoes, pitchforks, shovels, and plowshares used for farming and gardening were also part of the blacksmith repertoire of skills. If you needed a tooth pulled, the blacksmith and his pliers might have been the only game in town.

It is interesting to note that blacksmiths were early recyclers as were their customers. Metal was scarce, thus rarely thrown away. Instead, blacksmiths would mend old appliances, pans and kettles, and tools using pieces of worn-out metal tools, or any available source of metal not in use to repair needed tools and appliances.

If you needed a tooth pulled, the blacksmith and his pliers might have been the only game in town.

It's likely that early farmers on the Coastside would have had at least rudimentary metal working skills to make up for sparse availability of blacksmiths. In *Historic Coastside Reflections*, Michael N. Orange notes that there were 20 blacksmiths in all of San Mateo

County in 1860, and four blacksmith shops in Half Moon Bay in 1877. An article in the March 9, 1978, *Half Moon Bay Review* titled *The Olden Days On the Coastside* noted that the scarcity of blacksmiths meant that “most farmers had their own blacksmith shop at their own location or share the skills of a nearby neighbor.” But for many metal-working needs, the blacksmith was the expert and a necessity.

Blacksmithing in California, at least in the modern sense, likely dates back to the Spanish era, as author Maynard Geiger in *The Life and Times of Fray Junípero Serra: The Man Who Never Turned Back* notes the presence of a blacksmith named Chacon on the Portola expedition of 1769. Spanish missions also had blacksmith shops and indigenous people were trained and used in blacksmithing.

Closer to home on the coast, early blacksmithing was reported in the publication *History of San Mateo County, California, Including its Geography, Topography, Geology, and Climatography* (author anonymous) which noted that about 1860, settlers “began to settle around Spanishtown,” and “then came Joseph Denny, the blacksmith, although in his trade there had been a native blacksmith at the place long before and another called “Old Jake.”



Inside a blacksmith's shop in Half Moon Bay. Courtesy Spanishtown Historical Society (now HMB History Association)

In the late 1800s, one of the more notable blacksmiths in Half Moon Bay, according to Orange, was an Irishman named Peter Patrick Quinlan who operated his blacksmith shop on the corner of Miramontes and Main Street. He had emigrated to what was then called San Benito to become the town's blacksmith, as well as the owner of the Star Saloon, next to his shop. His customers could enjoy a drink or two while waiting for their repairs to be completed.



Peter P. Quinlan, Jack Quinlan, and George Shoultz. inside Peter Quinlan's Blacksmith Shop on Miramontes St. 1911. Courtesy of HMB History Association

Half Moon Bay's most famous blacksmith was Roy Knapp, who moved from New York to the Coastsides in 1871 and quickly partnered with Quinlan. Knapp was by most accounts an excellent blacksmith despite rankling many locals with his hatred for saloons and imbibing of alcohol. In partnering with Quinlan, he must have swallowed his temperance ideals in the interest of a business relationship. Along with his blacksmithing work, he solved a vexing problem by inventing the "side-hill plow" which could more easily create furrows in the hilly terrain on the coastsides and elsewhere. He bought out Quinlan in 1879 but continued to operate out of Quinlan's building in Half Moon Bay.

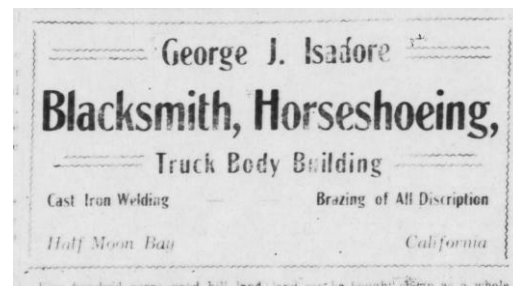
Joseph or "Joe" Rue was apparently a popular blacksmith in the early 1900s, appearing several times in the *Half Moon Bay Review and Pescadero Pebble*. He appears in October 1923, on the "sick list, in the October 1925, having attended an Odd Fellows Lodge and

getting a new coat of paint on his shop, and in November 1926, recovering from an illness. The paper stated "we are pleased to see the "village blacksmith" with his smiling face among us again. His friends will listen for their favorite tunes on Joe's anvil once more."

Outside of Half Moon Bay, the July 13, 1988, *Half Moon Bay Review* described the origins of the building where Apple Jack's Bar in La Honda is currently located. The structure was built in 1879 by John Sears as his blacksmith shop.

Writer Ginger Benson states that "Sears was helped in his efforts by A. L. Ackerman, a Redwood City blacksmith who went on from Applejacks to open his own blacksmith shop in San Gregorio." In that era, Benson notes that "people traveled by horse, stagecoach and buggies and would frequent the blacksmith shop on their trips into town." The shop was remodeled into an inn in 1910 by Frank Cavalli.

The industrial revolution brought mechanization including machine-made nails and other metal parts that reduced the demand for blacksmithing.



Courtesy Half Moon Bay Review and Pescadero Pebble, Mar 23, 1918

The automobile led to a decline in the use of horses further impacting blacksmiths' livelihoods. March 7, 1919 *Coastside Comet*, noted that "Mr. Isadore is one of the leading blacksmiths and horseshoers on the coastsides, and says that owing to the fact that most of the hauling and teaming is being done by automobile trucks his horseshoeing business has fallen off over 75 per cent in the past three years and therefore he is swinging into the machine shop and garage business in connection to his large blacksmith business."

Like many tradesmen in that era, blacksmiths had to adapt or fail.

If after reading this article you have a hankering to learn how to be a blacksmith, there are organizations that offer training for adults and young people, including <https://www.thecrucible.org/departments/blacksmithing/>.

Modern blacksmithing is less of an essential skill or trade, but it does provide an indelible link to the past where Coastsiders' livelihoods, transportation, and general wellbeing depended on those hardy souls that labored over hot fires to shape metal.

The Levy Bros.: Hardware, Groceries, and Dry Goods

—Chloe Wyman, rising Senior at Half Moon Bay High and volunteer with the Half Moon Bay History Association

The Bay Area is renowned for its incredibly diverse population, and Half Moon Bay is no exception. Half Moon Bay, along with the extended coast from Pacifica to Pescadero, has always featured several different cultural differences, including the French-Jewish immigrants known as The Levy Brothers.

The Levy Brothers, shortened to *The Levy Bros.*, were well known for their work as postmasters and saloonkeepers, with their first official shop opening in downtown Half Moon Bay in 1872. While the older residents of Half Moon Bay may remember The Levy Bros. and their work, the younger residents might not, given that the company closed its business in 1972.

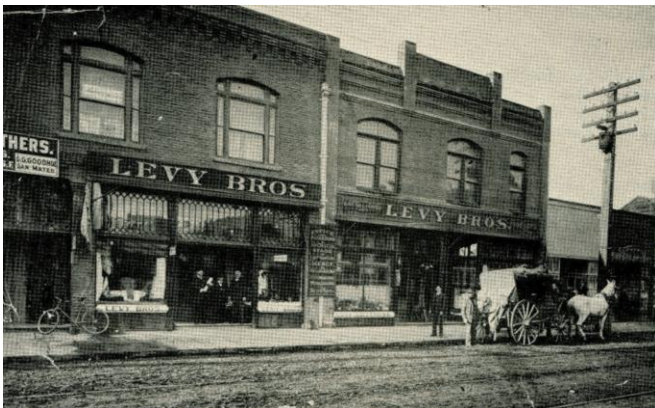
The French-Jewish immigrants acted as a modern-day Amazon, delivering within 24 hours of placing an order. They offered their services from Montara, Moss Beach, El Granada, Half Moon Bay, then known as Spanishtown, San Gregorio, Pescadero, to San Mateo.

The Levy Bros. sold everything from shawls for the ladies to liquor, and even machinery in their more inland, suburban stores, which extended to South San Francisco, Burlingame, Foster City, and Redwood City. They served as a staple in their local cities, offering anything someone could want. So much so that when they advertised their stores in the local newspapers, they called themselves “Three separate stores under one roof - Hardware, Groceries, and Dry Goods.” All connected by one large sign and a roof.

This newfound prosperity led to the relocation of their San Mateo store, equipped with exciting and new machinery, in the 1950s.

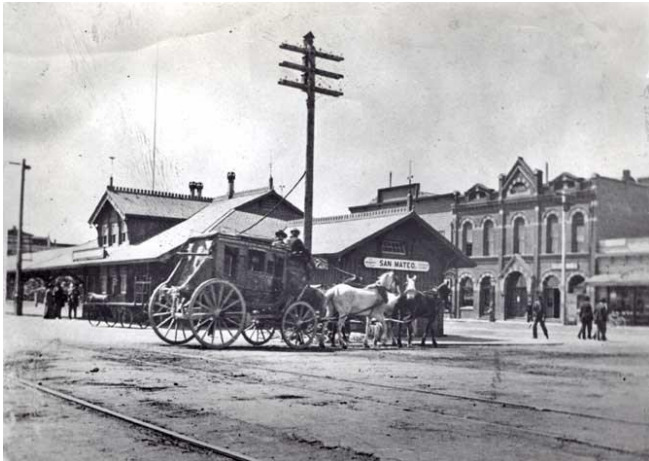
The Levy Bros. prided themselves on fast deliveries, and the job of taking orders from house to house fell to one person. The following day, these orders were delivered by another.

At the turn of a new age, The Levy Bros. began using newer and more modernized inventions to expedite their deliveries. They took advantage of telephone orders, and the new gas-powered wagons later gave way to cars. They delivered from their four stores, located in San Mateo, Burlingame, Redwood City, and Half Moon Bay, capitalizing on the much-needed delivery services across the coast.



Courtesy Half Moon Bay History Association

As the Great Depression hit, businesses underwent significant changes and were unable to recover to their previous levels. Unfortunately, The Levy Bros. were included in this.



Courtesy Half Moon Bay History Association

The years following 1930 were tough, and they experienced not only a crash but a 230% drop in their margin of profits. Despite all the continued efforts to revive the business, the inevitable fate was reaching The Levy Bros. This fate was postponed by their Third and Fourth Avenue stores in San Mateo, along with the inflation due to the Korean War. This newfound prosperity led to the relocation of their San Mateo store, equipped with exciting and new machinery, in the 1950s. This store had an escalator and air conditioning.

However, with the dying of stagecoaches and accessibility to cars on the rise, these French-Jewish immigrants were pushed out of business. Their attempts to expand were unsuccessful, and larger chains took their place.

Everybody Talks About the Weather...Notes from 1873

—Ellen Chiri

Coastside weather is a hot topic this summer as we yearn for warmth in the fog and drizzle. June and July 2025 were reportedly two of the coldest Coastside months recorded in decades—was it always so?

In June of 1873 a letter from a Half Moon Bay resident to the San Mateo Gazette had this to say about the weather, and about the foggy end to a ship:

“The weather has simmered down to a gentle breeze. Instead of having those cold, north winds complained of in my last we are having those kind of fogs which are not pleasant to be out in yet are a great advantage to the growing crops. All climates have their bitters and their sweets, and some have more bitter than sweet. So it is with some people.

“In regard to our climate, they say we don’t have the bright sunshine experienced in other places. But what is bright sunshine compared to good health and bright

prospects of good crops? People were not satisfied in Paradise, but why not be satisfied in Half Moon Bay where the Irish Lemon grows so abundantly, and all other crops the same? ...

“Some two weeks ago the Government was surveying out land near Half Moon Bay for the purpose of erecting a light-house and fogbell. I was informed by the surveyor that the Government had appropriated fourteen thousand dollars for that purpose. Then our light shall shine and our bell shall ring...

“The Half Moon Bay Wrecking Company are still at work. Many people are visiting the wreck to see the construction being erected for the purpose of bringing the goods to shore after being raised. The vessel is said to be eight hundred feet from shore, and the work accomplished is a masterly piece of mechanism, and to

any person who has never seen such work going on it is well worth his while to come and see it.”

The wreck was that of the *Aculeo*. The merchant ship left Liverpool on April 1, 1872, and by October 17 she was nearing San Francisco in a dense fog when she crashed on rocks off Point Montara. The ship’s wooden bulwarks were torn apart. Pieces of rigging and parts of her cargo were strewn on the beach—iron, wire, coal, dry goods, and boxes of toys.

The rocks that spelled doom for the *Aculeo* are known as the Colorado Reef, named for the steamship *Colorado*, which ran aground there on November 9, 1868. That fortunate ship survived but her close call was remembered vividly.

Of the many ships that wrecked on the rocky, fog-bound San Mateo coast, the *Aculeo*’s was one that prompted Congress to act. As the 1873 San Mateo Gazette letter-writer noted, “...the Government had appropriated fourteen thousand dollars...”

In 1874 a small wooden lighthouse was built on the bluff seventy feet above sea level at Point Montara. In March of 1875, a fog signal was added. The steam whistle emitted a five-second blast every thirty seconds, which could be heard from fifteen miles away.



The cast-iron lighthouse at Point Montara. Courtesy Hostelling International

The wooden structure was replaced in 1928 by a cast-iron lighthouse that had originally seen service at Mayo Beach on Cape Cod. [Lighthouse Digest](#) contributor

Colleen MacNeney notes that the tower was removed from Mayo Beach in 1923, and that it is “...still standing today, an amazing 2,764 miles from the original location.” She continues, “I was part of the team that rediscovered the facts that will forever change and correct the history of these two historic light stations.”

The wreck of the *Aculeo* and her cargo of toys captured the imagination of local artist Galen Wolf, who grew up in the San Francisco of tall-masted sailing ships plying the waters.

Wolf loved the Coastside and moved here in 1932. In the 1950s he began work on *Legends of the Coastland*, painting dramatic scenes of the land and sea he loved and writing their stories. His work “The Toy Ship” memorializes the wreck of the *Aculeo*.

“The reefs, that could be both beautiful and cruel, ripped the ship’s fine hull. Masts fell, cries arose, and boats were lowered” he wrote. “ ... Halfmoon came on the gallop to the near shore. In buggies and on horseback they came. Sailors were warmed and fed...”

Wolf’s painting shows toys under the sea, drifting towards rescue. And rescued some were. JoAnn Semones, in her book *Hard Luck Coast*, tells us that the doll with her crown was given to Wolf’s mother by the captain of the *Aculeo*.



The Toy Ship by Galen Wolf - Courtesy Half Moon Bay History Association

Reflections From a Kid Growing Up in Moss Beach

—Joe Brennan

The restaurant overlooking Moss Beach's tide pools has had four names: Frank's Place, Vic Torres', Galway Bay Inn, and The Distillery. Frank Torres built and operated the restaurant until he built his new restaurant on Highway One at the south end of Montara Beach...again with a million-dollar view. When Frank moved operations to Montara his brother Vic ran the original in Moss Beach. It was known for its Sunday music sessions with musicians, artists, and opera stars down from the city.

In my last year of high school, I needed cash to attend the Senior Ball, so I rattled up to the kitchen door of Vic Torres' in my Model A pickup on the morning of January 1, 1964. Vic's wife Pearl answered the door looking bedraggled, as I had interrupted her making coffee to recover from the previous night's New Year's Eve revelries. I asked if she had any work and she replied, "Good God yes, the place is a mess from last night and we have to open for lunch!" Hired on the spot as dishwasher and busboy, I went right to work.



Artwork on dishes used at Frank's Place, which is now the Moss Beach Distillery. Courtesy Joe Brennan

I had heard that the building was haunted by a ghost, "the Blue Lady." A week into my job, and after getting to know the other employees, I was requested to help downstairs in the storeroom opposite the restrooms.

The walls were lined with shelving holding canned goods and all manner of restaurant supplies. I was directed to climb up the front of the shelves to a strange long box on the top shelf. They said I had to climb up, open the box, and reach inside. This, it turns out, was a wicker coffin from the Philippines!

Despite feeling set up, I climbed up and reluctantly raised the lid to reach inside—at which point they flipped the lights off and screamed! Startled, I jumped back and landed hard on the concrete floor bruising both my heel bones. I did not suspect it was the hazing for new employees... they sure got me!

The next year while attending College of San Mateo I had a weekend job with Citizens Utilities, the water company for Moss Beach and Montara. We got a call saying that water was running out of the meter box in front of Vic Torres' so I was sent to investigate.

The piping was leaking out of the meter, so we shut off the water and made a repair. Six or nine months later we received the same complaint and upon inspection found the same problem. We gave it some thought and realized that ground movement was pulling the pipes apart.

Despite feeling set up, I climbed up and reluctantly raised the lid to reach inside—at which point they flipped the lights off and screamed!

This time the Citizens Utilities manager Frank Dillon told me to get the hardware to install a rubber hose connection and allow a complete loop to dissipate any stress. That was done, we didn't get any more calls about that problem.

Across the parking lot from the restaurant was the beautiful old three-story wooden Marine View Hotel.



The Marine View Hotel, built on the Moss Beach bluffs in 1913. Courtesy Half Moon Bay History Association

It was long out of business and a hermit had lived in the basement and acted as watchman. Later in its decrepitude it had been condemned, and a local contractor got the job of dismantling it.

I was still working for the water department, which meant I had to join the Point Montara Volunteer Fire Department because I knew the water system and could maximize the resource to any area needed. So, one day I got a call to maximize water pressure and volume to the area of Vic Torres' because the Marine View Hotel was ablaze.

I was doing as trained when another call came in that the Catholic Church on Wienke Way in Moss Beach was also ablaze and the responding Half Moon Bay volunteer fire department would need all the water we could give them too!

It was a challenge, and the fires were fought valiantly but ended in the total loss of both structures in what was perhaps Moss Beach's smokiest day.

President's Message

—Bill Scholtz, President

As you can see, we have a change in the Board presidency. After over five very productive years, Juliette Applewhite has decided it's time to take a break. Juliette's leadership, dedication, and vision have left a lasting legacy—not only in the many initiatives she spearheaded during her tenure, but most notably in making possible the creation of our beautiful new museum in the historic Barn. This was no small feat. Juliette's unwavering commitment to preserving and sharing the rich heritage of the Coastside helped turn a long-held dream into a tangible, thriving space where our community can gather, learn, and connect with our past.

Under her guidance, the Association has grown stronger, more engaged, and more deeply rooted in the place we all call home. We owe her a heartfelt thank you for her years of tireless work and inspiring leadership.

On the topic of the museum, there's a lot of new things to see! Over the past couple of months, we've expanded our exhibit space and introduced several new displays. If it has been a while since your last visit, now's the perfect time to come back.

And if that's not enough to tempt you, our native plant garden just might be. A year after planting, it's fully filled in and now bursting with blooms—truly a sight to see.

Of course, the old jail is always a hit. When friends and family come to town, bring them by for a classic “cell-fie” behind bars!

Do Not Miss Our September Program – Whales on the Central California Coast

Tuesday September 23, 2025 - 6:00 PM. Half Moon Bay Library 620 Correas St, Half Moon Bay. Doors open at 5:30 PM

Richard King will present an engaging talk on our historical connections with whales along the central California coast—from Indigenous peoples' relationships with whales and the arrival of American and Portuguese whalers to modern whaling out of Moss Landing and San Francisco. He'll also discuss the arrival of whale watching, and the modern environmental movement.

Richard King lives in Santa Cruz and is a Visiting Professor at the Sea Education Association in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. He is the award-winning author of five books about our shifting relationship with the ocean, including *Ahab's Rolling Sea: A Natural History of Moby-Dick*. Learn more about Rich at richardjking.info.

Help Preserve Coastside History

The Half Moon Bay History Association is dedicated to bringing together all members of the community, to preserve and share the history of the San Mateo County Coastside, from Montara to Año Nuevo. Our history is the lives and works of all the cultures that made the Coastside what it is today, from the times of the earliest Ohlone villages, to the Spanish and Mexican periods, through the early American period, to modern times.



Let Us Hear from You

Stop by the Coastside History Museum at 505 Johnston Street, Half Moon Bay, CA.

Click [here](#) for our YouTube videos.

Follow us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/HMBHistory/>.

Visit <https://www.halfmoonbayhistory.org/>. Send email to hmbha.contact@gmail.com.

Send mail to Half Moon Bay History Association, PO Box 248, Half Moon Bay, CA 94019-0248 or call (650) 479-1935.

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