

Coastside Chronicles

A Publication of the Half Moon Bay History Association

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HALF MOON BAY

HISTORY

ASSOCIATION

“I thought we were in the clear, but an ember fell on the historic farmhouse and it is gone”

Coastside Calamities

The sea sweeps a ship to her doom; the earth shakes; fires consume buildings and devastate forests...

Some of the stories in this issue of Coastside Chronicles are from long ago, and some are within living memory. Some describe irrecoverable loss and some show resilience in the face of loss. All are part of the Coastside’s rich history.

The Sky Turned Orange: The South Coast in Flames

—Ellen Chiri

In the early morning of August 16, 2020, a thunderstorm produced an onslaught of lightning strikes that ignited hundreds of fires in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Called the CZU Lightning Complex fires, a reference to Cal Fire's designation for its San Mateo-Santa Cruz unit, the blazes burned thousands of acres in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties.

The fire took one person’s life, devastated



Photo courtesy of Cal Fire via KAZU.org

forests that included some of the coast’s oldest redwood trees, and destroyed hundreds of structures. Año Nuevo, Big Basin, Butano, and Henry Cowell State Parks were all threatened.

Mark Hylkema, now-retired California State Parks Archaeologist, scrambled to rescue historic artifacts that were in the path of the flames. He and State Parks crews saved photographs, historical records, Indigenous artifacts, old logging tools, blacksmithing equipment, animal specimens, and many other objects, rescuing irreplaceable objects that tell the history of the area.

Two of the many structures destroyed were at the historic Green Oaks and Cascade ranches just north of Año Nuevo on San Mateo County’s south coast. In the 19th century the Coastside was key in feeding the burgeoning population of San Francisco, and in 1862 Isaac and Rensselaer Steele started dairies—Isaac’s Green Oaks ranch, now known as Pie Ranch for its original triangular pie-slice shape, and Rensselaer’s Cascade Ranch.

Two days after the fire began it was worsening. At Pie Ranch, Co-Founders Nancy Vail and Jered Lawson received orders by helicopter to evacuate immediately. “We had time to grab important documents and valuables, and say some prayers guided by an Amah Mutsun tribal elder who was on her way to visit us,” Vail said. “Neighbors and friends showed up immediately and helped move our goats to a ranch in Santa Cruz... seeing the fire coming over the ridge, it was clear we needed to move fast... we realized we might lose everything so we said our goodbyes.” Jered Lawson returned to fight the fires at Pie Ranch alongside CalFire and neighbors.

Half a mile north, CalFire, farmers and neighbors were fighting the fire at Cascade Ranch. “Everything was burning at the same time,” Nancy Vail recalls. At Cascade Ranch the home built by Rensselaer Steele survived, but the barn, bunk house, and cook house were incinerated.



The barn at Cascade Ranch --Photos courtesy of Mark Hylkema

At Pie Ranch, the house built by Isaac Steele in 1863 burned to the ground. “I thought we were in the clear, but an ember fell on the historic farmhouse and it is gone,” Vail wrote in a social media post.

“In the living room we had framed copies of letters between Abraham Lincoln and General Frederick Steele along with 12 copies of historic photographs of the Steele family from the late 1800s, an old key, a pocket watch, glass bottles and other artifacts from the Steele family.”



The Steele house at Pie Ranch --Photos courtesy of Nancy Vail and Jered Larson

The loss of the Steele house was devastating, but fortunately Pie Ranch was able to rebuild it with the goal of honoring the past and modeling a sustainable future. The house is in the same footprint and has much of the same look and design as the historic Steele farmhouse.



Rebuilt Steele house at Pie Ranch --Photos courtesy of Jered Larson

Sustainability goals include local materials such as oat-straw bales grown at Pie Ranch and put in the walls for insulation, cypress and cedar paneling from the surrounding trees that suffered from the fire but were still millable, clay plaster walls and floors made from the soil removed for the foundation, passive ventilation and heating systems, and water-conscious features indoors and out.

Pie Ranch is grateful to have a beautiful space now for its offices and for hosting visiting groups with a focus on food and farming-

related meetings, retreats, and education. To learn more about Pie Ranch visit <https://www.pieranch.org/>.

The south coast fire is part of history now, but over half a decade later we still see the skeletons of burned trees stabbing the skyline, reminders of when the Coastside skies turned orange.



Orange sky at Davenport August 19, 2020 --Courtesy of Dagmar Dolatschko

The Wreck of the Coya: The Coastside's Deadliest Disaster

--Bill Scholtz

On Saturday the 24th of November, 1866, the Coya, a British iron-hulled barque¹ carried a cargo full of coal from Australia and was nearing San Francisco. Around 7:30 PM, Captain Richard Paige thought they were miles off shore when someone spotted waves breaking over rocks near Pigeon Point. The captain called for an immediate course change, but it was too late.

The Ship

The Coya was built in London in 1863. It was 156 feet long and weighed 515 tons. By the 1860s, iron-hulled ships had become very popular. They were more resistant to leakage and fire and allowed for larger ships. Also, the iron-clad ones were lighter than their wood counterparts, allowing for more cargo. In 1865 the Coya was transferred to Australia to transport coal.

Australia was one of the largest producers of coal at the time and was far closer to San Francisco than the east coast of the United States by way of the southern tip of South America. So, it made sense to ship coal from Australia to San Francisco.



Typical rig of a barque --courtesy of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

The Last Voyage

On September 23, 1866, the Coya left Sydney Harbor for San Francisco, a trip it had done several times before. She had a full load of coal, a crew of 20, nine passengers, and one stowaway who was discovered shortly after departure.

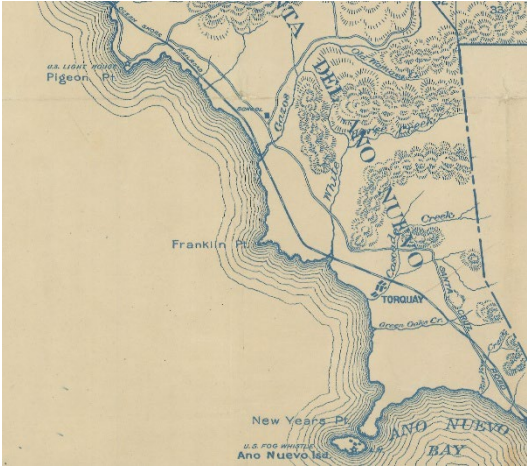
The first mishap came twelve days after leaving Sydney. One of the crew members Peter Johnson, was on the jibboom, an extension from the bowsprit, when he fell overboard. According to George Byrnes, one of the passengers, the crew “used all endeavors, but could not pick him up.”

On October 13th, the Coya made a stop at Pitcairn Island, a common stop from Australia to San Francisco. They left the same day.

The Wreck

Starting Friday, the 23rd of November, two months after leaving Sydney, the skies were cloudy with squalls, preventing Captain Paige from taking a sight (determining location through celestial navigation). The bad weather continued through Saturday, the 24th, forcing the captain to estimate his position through a process called “dead reckoning” (estimating position using course direction and speed). In the early evening, he believed them to be off the Farallon Islands, about 27 miles from the Golden Gate, and set a course accordingly.

¹ A barque is a three-masted ship where the two forward masts are square-rigged and the aft mast is mizzen-rigged.



From 1913 San Mateo County map showing where Franklin Point is

At 7:30 pm, the passengers and some of the crew were sitting below for Tea (the British term for supper) when land was spotted. Captain Paige came up on deck and called for an immediate change of course. But it was too late. The Coya came up on the rocks near Franklin Point (named for the Sir John Franklin which was wrecked there almost two years earlier) between Pigeon Point and Año Nuevo.

With each passing wave, the Coya was lifted higher on the rocks and leaning further over on its side. The lifeboats were quickly swept away. All the passengers had come on deck except Mrs. Jeffreys who had been confined to her cabin, having given birth only two days earlier. The following is a description of what happened next from the November 27th, 1866 edition of the “Daily Alta” based on the testimony of surviving passenger, George Byrnes:

The scene now was something fearful; the main deck, being torn up by the pressure from the water underneath, made one of the most frightful noises ever heard, the ladies screaming and being washed away one by one, and drowning under the lee rigging. One of the ladies, Mrs. ROWDEN, had a life-buoy on, which Dr. ROWDEN generously took off himself and gave to his wife, thereby throwing nearly all chance of his own life away to try and save his wife, but it was of no avail. A tremendous sea now swept aft and carried some more poor fellows to a watery grave, and cleaning everything off the poop².

At this point Mrs. Jeffreys came on deck with her newborn wrapped in her shawl. She was quickly washed away. Byrnes’ story continues:

There was a move upon the skylight being washed off level with the deck, and Mr. BYRNES smashed down head first into the cabin. The ship at this time gave a very heavy lurch and settled over to the windward, with the mast on a level with the water. What few remained now were about 10 in number, all sitting upon the side of the taffrail³, the sea now breaking over us very often, until we began to get numbed in the limbs with the cold, as at this time no one had on more than a shirt and trowsers, ready to do their best for shore ... There we sat, looking death in the face. Some were making prayers to the Almighty to assist them, while others sat in mute despair, but not a cry of anguish or a word was to be heard, even when the ship commenced crashing up from forward and coming aft to set us all adrift on the waves. We did not think that one would be left to tell the sorrowful tale. All of us are now tossing about on the wild billows. I can count 5 struggling in an eddy that is whirling us round and round, grasping at anything that comes in their way,

Of the ten passengers and nineteen crew, only three survived; passenger George Byrnes (who told the story) and First Mate Thomas Barstowe, both of whom found life jackets, and Seaman Walter Cooper who clung onto a piece of debris.

² The poop is short for poop deck, the elevated deck in the aft of a ship.

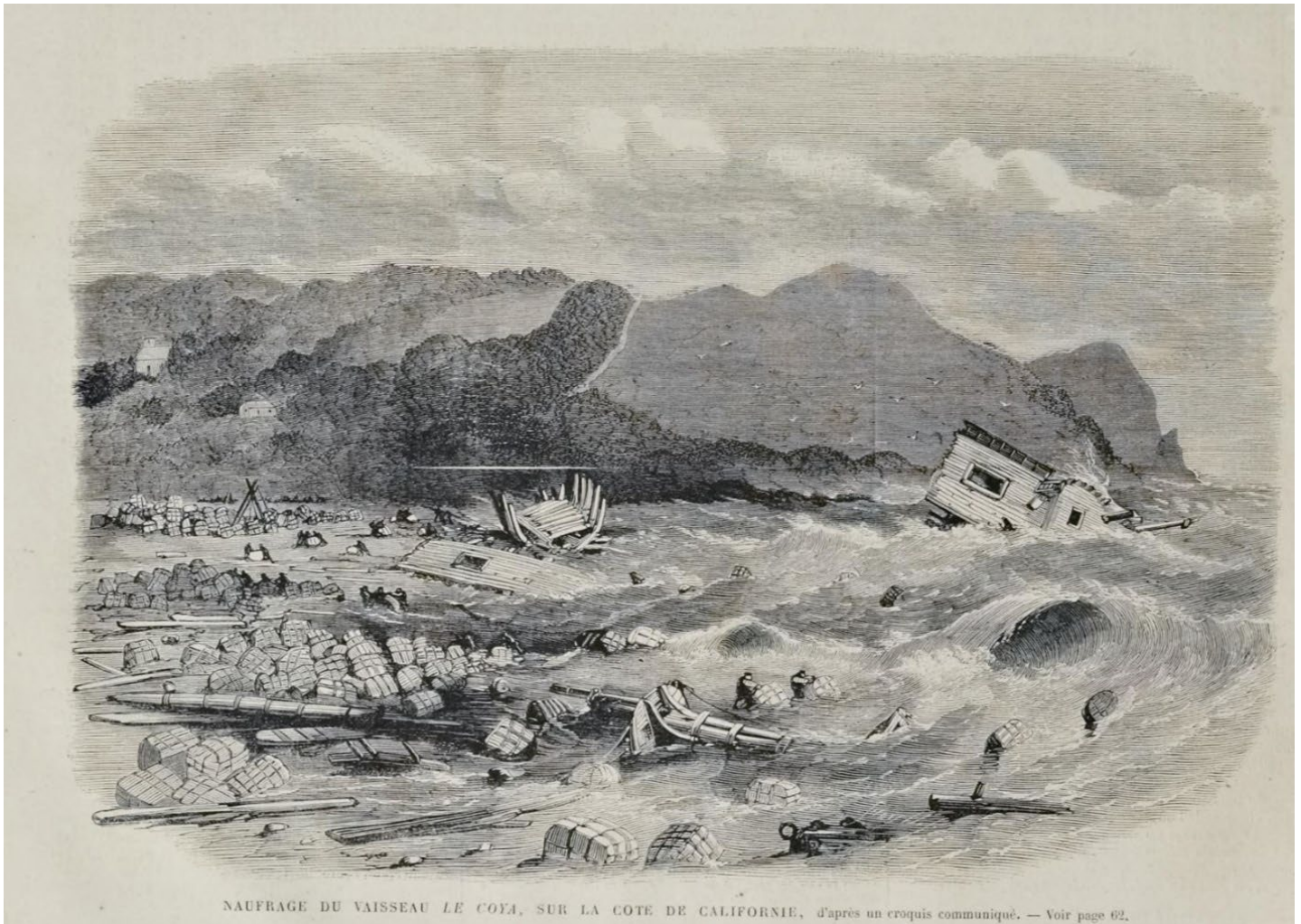
³ Hand rail running around deck at the stern a ship.

It was pitch black out and the three men found themselves at the base of a cliff with very little beach. For protection they dug a small ditch in the sand and huddled there. They were soaking wet and couldn't even dry out because the water kept washing into their ditch.

When the sun finally came up, they got help from a local farm. A quick scan of the beach found only one body, that of Mrs. Jeffreys still with the shawl but no sign of the baby. They quickly buried her body.

Within a few days, as is always the case, the beach was crowded with treasure hunters looking for whatever they could salvage. One onlooker named R. Bryon drew a sketch of what he saw and sent it off to be published in the French magazine, L'Univers Illustré. Part of his description of the scene, translated back into English said:

Every moment the sea, still rough and stirred up by a violent wind, was casting shapeless debris onto the sand: here a fragment of the stern, there a part of the deck planks and the timbers of the hull; further on, sections of masts; in a hundred places, scattered crates, barrels, furniture, and bales.



Drawing of the wreck of the Coya from a few days after it happened from the French magazine L'Univers illustré. It was printed in the January 26, 1867 edition. It was supposed to be done by R. Bryon at the scene, but given it was published only two months after the event, that is doubtful.

The Mystery of the Woman of African Descent

Some of the crew and most of the passengers who died were moved to San Francisco for burial. The rest were buried at Franklin Point, where the dead from the Sir John Franklin were buried. In 1999, the graves were disinterred and moved to a protected site. One of the graves turned out to be that of a woman of African descent who was about 20 years of age. Her grave differed from the others in that she was buried face down. For various reasons, it's more likely she is from the Coya than from other wrecks there. The August 2, 2021 edition of the [Alta Journal](#) has an interesting article on her and who she might have been.

Aftermath

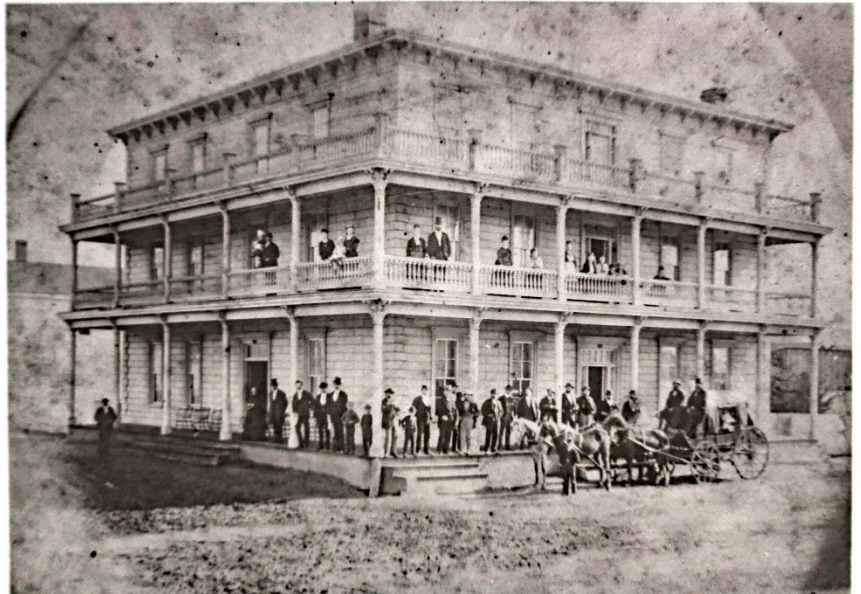
Coya was the fourth wreck between Pigeon Point and Año Nuevo, and like each one before, led to a call for a lighthouse on Pigeon Point. But it still wasn't enough. It would take a fifth wreck, the Hellespont, also carrying coal on the Sydney to San Francisco route that was wrecked within a mile of where Coya went down almost two years later to have the lighthouse built. The Hellespont was luckier in that they only lost eleven people.

The Occidental Hotel Burns – Half Moon Bay's Biggest Fire

--Bill Scholtz

Around noon on Wednesday, April 11, 1894, a fire started in the Occidental Hotel and quickly got out of control. A couple of days later, the Times Gazette said, "To-day Halfmoon Bay's only hotel, drug store and several other buildings lie a smoldering and blackened mass."

The Occidental Hotel was a three-story structure, built in 1866 on the southeast corner of Kelly Avenue and Purissima Street to replace a smaller hotel next door called the Halfmoon Bay House. It was built by a Mr. Dawson and was at the time called the Dawson House. The hotel quickly became the centerpiece of the town. Starting in 1867, 4th of July Celebrations were held in front of the hotel with orators standing on the second-floor balcony. In the evening, all attended a ball in the hotel's ballroom called the Pacific Hall. It is likely the largest building ever built in downtown Half Moon Bay (known at the time as Spanishtown or Halfmoon Bay). Dawson's involvement with the hotel was short-lived. In 1868 he sold it to a Mr. Campbell who kept the name.



Occidental Hotel –Half Moon Bay History Association

After a few years, the hotel was already getting run down. In 1873, James Schuyler bought it, renovated it and renamed it the Schuyler House.

By 1891, it was sold again and the new owners renamed it the Occidental Hotel. Occidental means relating to the western part of the world, mostly Europe and the Americas. The name may have been chosen as a nod to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In any case, the owners only had the hotel for a few years before the fire.

It's likely the fire started in a defective flue. The hotel did not have any equipment to put out a fire, and it would be another five years before the town had a fire department.

This wasn't the first Half Moon Bay fire. There had been another one in January of 1880. That one started in Robert Knapp's blacksmith shop and plow factory on Main Street. It was on the west side of the street, halfway between Mill Street and Kelly Avenue. Nothing could be done to save the shop/factory. The fire threatened nearby buildings, but ultimately, what prevented the fire from burning more of the town was the light rain that was falling.

Knapp's operation was a total loss and he had no insurance. But he did rebuild and his operation outlived him.

Around the time of that fire, Half Moon Bay decided they needed some kind of firefighting equipment. Knapp and grocer Joseph Debenedetti donated a 300-foot hose along with some buckets and axes. They were stored at an all-night livery stable. If there was a fire, the stable boy, aged 15, with last name Joseph, would wheel the wheelbarrow with the hose to the Knapp shop. Knapp had a large need for water so he installed the first water system in town. It



Occidental Hotel with Smead's drugstore next door –Half Moon Bay History Association

was connected to a 19th century version of a fire hydrant in front of his building. Joseph would connect the hose to the hydrant and hope it could reach the fire. A couple of years later the system was upgraded when business members chipped in to buy a cart to replace the wheelbarrow. The cart could roll the entire hose up. Since Joseph was in charge of the equipment, he was jokingly referred to as the youngest fire chief in the state.

The hose would have almost reached the Occidental Hotel. But that was OK because it was not like fire hoses today that dump massive amounts of water on a fire. The goal would have been to fill the buckets so they could be used to put out the fire.

But even that would have been too late for this fire. Peter Burke was the manager at the time and he led everyone on an effort to get all the guests, employees, and family members out along with personal effects and any furniture that could be moved.

The same was done with the drugstore next door. The druggist was able to get out most of his stock.



The second Occidental Hotel –Half Moon Bay History Association

The fire continued east on Kelly Avenue and then around the corner on Main Street. Most of the other buildings that burned were residential. Because the wind was blowing out of the west, they were able to stop it before it burned all the way to Miramontes.

The problem was to prevent it from jumping to the other side of the street. This is probably where the firefighting equipment was helpful. As embers were starting fires across the street, they were able to put them out. Angelo Boitano's store at 521 Main Street (now the oldest commercial building in town) was threatened for a time.

When the smoke finally cleared that day, somewhere between eight and ten buildings were burned to the ground. The estimated value of the destruction was about \$17,000 or about \$670,000 today. The total insured value, for those who were insured, was \$5,400.

Since Smead was able to save most of his stock of drugs, and since he didn't own his building, he simply moved across the street to a new building so the town didn't have to go without a drugstore. The hotel was quickly rebuilt, this time a little fancier, but smaller and with no balconies. Over the next decade or so, they went from being the sole hotel in the area to being just one of many. The building's last breath was to house troop protecting the Coastside during WWII. Today Ayudando Latinos A Soñar (ALAS) owns the site the hotel was in. A couple of years ago, the prominent attorney and history buff Joseph Cotchett built a replica of the second Occidental Hotel one block north of where it used to stand. This version is a residential and office building rather than a hotel.

Not everything about the fire was bad. A year after the fire, a three-story building was built on a lot in the middle of the Main Street block that had been cleared by the fire. The year after that, the Odd Fellows moved from where they were

in the Levy building on Purissima Street to the new, larger space in that new building. This is lucky for them, because had they stayed in the Levy building, they would have lost everything ten years later in the 1906 Earthquake.

The fire inspired the town to have an actual fire department. However, it was not quickly set up. On November 8, 1899, the first meeting of what would become Half

Moon Bay Hose Company Number One met, ironically, in the Odd Fellows Hall, in a building that likely would not have existed, were it not for the fire.

In the end, the burning of the Occidental Hotel marked a turning point in Half Moon Bay's history. The fire destroyed the town's most prominent landmark and left a scar on the business district, but it also pushed the community toward modernization. New buildings rose from the ashes and residents finally recognized the need for organized fire protection. Like many disasters in small California towns of the nineteenth century, the 1894 fire became woven into local memory not simply because of what was lost, but because of what came afterward—a more resilient and better organized Half Moon Bay.



The new Odd Fellows building and several other buildings built after the fire –Half Moon Bay History Association

Shaking the Coast: The 1906 Earthquake's Effect on the Coastside

--Bill Scholtz

A couple of months ago, we had an earthquake strong enough to wake many of us up. It was one of the worst since Loma Prieta. Imagine waking up to one that is more than 1,200 times larger, packing more than 44,000 times as much energy. That's what happened at 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906. Our little quake was a magnitude 4.6 while the 1906 one was magnitude 7.9.

Much of San Francisco was destroyed by the quake, and much of what was left was destroyed by fire.

Here on the Coastside, we fared much better, but we still had significant damage.



Showing the Ocean Shore Railroad on the section of San Pedro Mountain where much of the hillside had slid into the ocean only a few years earlier –Half Moon Bay History Association

Cracks in the land showed up in many places. Landslides in the hills covered roads, sometimes in sections more than 100 feet long. Probably the biggest land slide was much of the west face of San Pedro Mountain from Devil’s Slide toward Point San Pedro. The slide started from 800 feet up and slid into the ocean, taking a few hundred feet of the new and not yet open Ocean Shore Railroad. It would be a couple of years before workers came back to complete the railroad.

Most buildings in the Coastside were wood framed. Wood bends so it can give during a quake. The chimneys and foundations on the other hand were made of masonry and that does not give. In most areas, most if not all the chimneys fell, even as far south as the keeper’s house at the Año Nuevo Lighthouse.

Pigeon Point: The lighthouse, made of bricks, had a crack all around the inside about 40 feet from the ground. It was not

considered to be dangerous. There was minor damage elsewhere.

Pescadero: Only three brick chimneys survived. The Catholic church was knocked off its foundation with heavy damage. Plaster fell off walls and there were cracks in the streets. In the field belonging to D. S. Jackson water started bubbling up. It wasn’t hot, but it looked like it was boiling. When Willis Jackson held a lighted match near the water, the flame jumped four or five feet high.

San Gregorio: In one of the two stores, all the goods fell off the shelves. The hotel lost some plaster and a few dishes. Some of the farmland nearby had cracks twelve to eighteen inches wide.

Lobitos: The slot machine in the saloon fell off the table along with almost all the bottles on the shelf running east-west.

Purissima: They lost all their chimneys and had a 1,000-foot-long north/south crack in the ground nearby.

La Honda: They lost all the chimneys, some lamps from tables and the hotel lost some plaster from the walls.

There was little reported damage to buildings north of Half Moon Bay.



Bridge over Crystal Springs Reservoir showing the shift in the ground following the earthquake. The San Andreas Fault runs down the middle of the reservoir. –Courtesy USGS

Half Moon Bay: This is where some of the worst damage was. Before the quake, Half Moon Bay had three brick buildings and one adobe building. After the quake, there were none of either.

The Bank of Half Moon Bay had opened for business about a year before the quake. They had recently moved into a brick building on Purissima at the northeast corner of Purissima and Miramontes Streets. The building was totally destroyed.

One block north on the opposite side of Purissima, where the Mercantile Building is today, was a brick building where the Levy Brothers Store was. Richard Mattingly and Charles Kelly had built the north half (right half) of the building in 1866 and the south half (left half) in 1868. The downstairs of the left building was a drug store and the Odd Fellows were upstairs. The Levy brothers bought the left building in 1872 and started their business. In 1875 the



Bank of Half Moon Bay building shortly before the earthquake –Courtesy San Mateo County Historical Association ID 92-78.34



town hall was in the building on the right, and by 1883 the building contained a post office and Salvador Garcia's Pacific Saloon. John Pitcher bought the building in 1890 for \$6,500. Luckily for the Odd Fellows, they had moved to their present building in 1896. Eventually the Levy Store occupied both buildings.

The building was completely leveled by the quake. At the time of the earthquake, the Levy Brothers had been moving all their operations to their San Mateo store so, after the quake, they did not rebuild.



The Levy Brothers Store before and after the earthquake –Half Moon Bay History Association

The Main Street Bridge over Pilarcitos Creek had just been built in 1900. It was the first reinforced concrete structure in San Mateo County. Instead of using rebar for the reinforcements, they used old San Francisco cable car cables. The bridge was built under the direction of then County Supervisor, Joseph Debenedetti of Half Moon Bay.

A Santa Cruz paper proclaimed the bridge a total loss, but to paraphrase Mark Twain, “The report of its death was an exaggeration.” The bridge itself survived with some damage, but the wing walls (the retaining walls on either side of the bridge – see the diagonal wall on the left of the bridge) needed to be replaced.



Main Street Bridge over Pilarcitos Creek –Half Moon Bay History Association

Just north of the Pilarcitos Bridge, on the west side a little way off Main Street is where José Tiburcio Vásquez built his adobe home around the middle of the 19th Century. There had been several adobes in the Half Moon Bay area but this was likely the last one on the Coastside. We believe this was the only location on the Coastside where lives were lost. According to The Enterprise of South San Francisco’s May 5, 1906 edition:

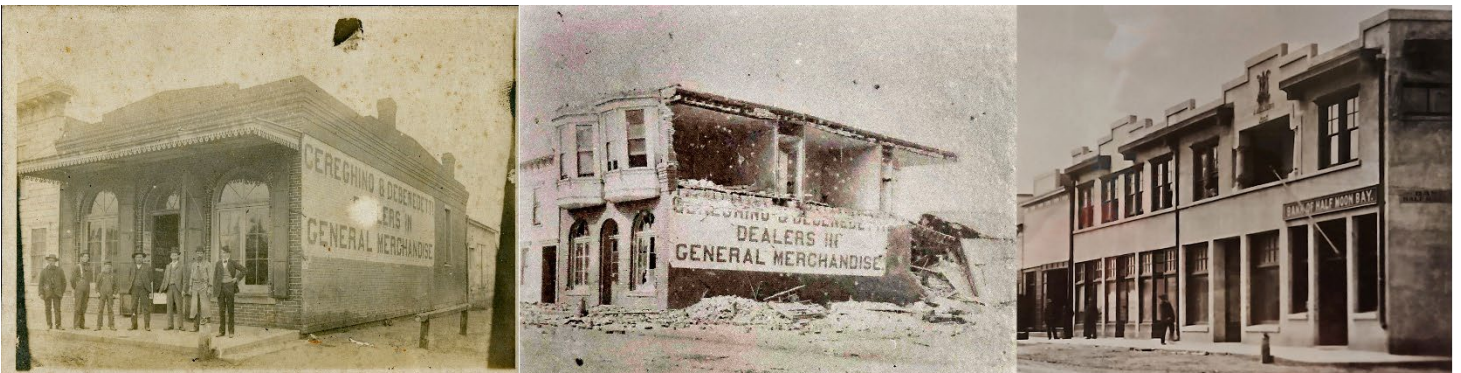
“The old Vasquez adobe, one of the oldest landmarks, is a total wreck. In this three lives were lost. ...There were many others in the old building and that many others were not lost is certainly wonderful.”



The Vasquez Adobe following the Earthquake –Half Moon Bay History Association

The southwest corner of Main and Mill Streets was where the Cereghino & Debenedetti General Merchandise Store was. Joseph Debenedetti ran the store and his brother-in-law Joseph Cereghino of San Francisco was an investor. The store opened in the brick building in 1872, but the building may have preceded that. Debenedetti and his family had lived in the wooden building next door, but shortly before the earthquake, he had added a second story to the brick building where he and his wife lived. Fortunately, on the day of the quake, they were not home. The bedroom on the second floor collapsed into the first floor and parts of the second-floor wall came down.

Based on the survival of the Main Street bridge that was built under Debenedetti’s direction, he built a new building, larger in the same location made of reinforced concrete. This Debenedetti building still stands today.



Cereghino & Debenedetti General Merchandise Store before the second-floor addition and earthquake and after the earthquake and the post 1906 Debenedetti Building built with reinforced concrete –Half Moon Bay History Association

Fortunately, there was no fire because the water pipes had been severed so putting out a fire would have been hard. Other damage included the Methodist Church which broke away from its foundation and both major hotels, the Occidental Hotel and Hotel Mosconi (now San Benito House) suffered significant plaster damage. Like the rest of the Coastsides, many, if not most of the chimneys were down.

From The Enterprise of South San Francisco's May 5, 1906 edition:

“Every one who can use a hammer and saw is hard at work repairing the damage done last week by the earthquake. The spirit shown by our citizens is the true American Spirit. In a short time the only trace of the quake will be in the memory.”



The Zabella House following the earthquake –Half Moon Bay History Association

Cunha's Country Store—The Heart of Half Moon Bay in Flames

—Ellen Chiri

In 1930 William Cunha and his wife Joya opened a store at 448 Main Street Half Moon Bay, in the building that had housed the Index Saloon at the turn of the 20th century.

The Cunha family lived upstairs, and when daughter Bev was about 12 years old she learned to use the cash register. “They put a Coke box there so I could reach,” she reports. She helped her parents in the store into adulthood, when she met future husband Glenn Ashcraft. He had come to visit his brother and “never went back home,” she said.

Bev eventually assumed responsibility for Cunha's operations and over the years Cunha's Country Store became the heart of town, with friends chatting and kids coming in after school for treats. Upstairs became a general store, where you could buy anything from cowboy boots to kitchenware.

In 2003 the roof was being repaired when a fire broke out, reportedly from the combination of a propane torch and roofing tar. The roofer put the fire out and stayed to be sure it was out... but it wasn't. It had made its way into the walls and smoldered for over an hour until Cunha employees noticed a smoky haze developing and called 911.

When the call came in at 5:59 p.m. Half Moon Bay Fire Protection District Engine 41 was at the scene of an auto accident on Highway 1 just south of Kelly Avenue, only a few blocks away. They “responded almost instantaneously,” the Half Moon Bay Review reported, “But instantaneously wasn't fast enough.” The fire had already burst into the butcher shop and spread into the first floor.



Firefighter Chris Cushman tried to go up the stairs, but “I could hear the debris falling in from up above, and there were flames rolling out the door,” he told the Review. “The smoke was so thick everywhere I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. We stayed for about 10 minutes, trying to work our way up the stairwell. But we couldn’t. That’s when they made the call for everyone to get out.”

Although the firefighters couldn’t save the old building, they stopped the blaze from spreading to the Miller-Dutra funeral parlor on Kelly Avenue and the bookstore next door on Main Street.

Response to the loss of the store was

Cunha’s Country Store May 23, 2003 --Courtesy of Paolo Vescia
 overwhelming, and Coastsiders reacted with support, grief, memories--and cash.

Fundraising events included a silent auction at the farmers’ market, a block party, a concert, donations from Coastside businesses and organizations, and a relief fund for the employees who were suddenly and shockingly out of work. After a period of uncertainty, Bev Cunha Ashcraft decided to rebuild. “People come up to me and say ‘I was raised in your store’ ” she said. “They’re all like family to me. And that’s why we were still there, all these years, because we took things to heart.”

Cunha’s reopened one year after the fire, with the new building closely resembling the original, and a huge Main Street block party celebrated.

The doors from the old store were saved from the flames and are on display in the Coastside History Museum at 505 Johnston Street.

The marks from generations of hands pushing the doors open—at adult height and kid height—are there, along with memories of the heart of Half Moon Bay.



The doors, saved from the flames - Coastside History Museum

First Person: A Photographer Remembers the Cunha Store Fire

--Paolo Vescia

On May 21, 2003 I happened to be in Palo Alto when Debra Godshall, the publisher of the Half Moon Bay Review, called to tell me Cunha's was on fire and to get there quick. I drove like hell over Highway 92 and when I got there Main street was closed, and all kinds of fire companies were on the scene.



Cunha's Country Store May 23, 2003 --Courtesy of Paolo Vescia

The fire crews were set up and had been pouring water and foam on the building for at least an hour before I got there. Most of the smoke rising out of the building's roof and windows was still black, and flames were still pumping out of the second-story windows and rising above the parapet.

I put on my press pass and started moving around for angles, trying to stay out of the way of the fire and police officers and looking for compositions that would tell the story.

There were two extended ladders and probably five or six ground hoses arching water into Cunha's, so I worked a lot with a wide-angle lens.

I knew some of the local firefighters so I framed them in my shots when I could. I also made sure to turn around and get some bystanders' reactions. Small crowds of worried bystanders stood on the sidewalks. In City Hall, which is diagonally across from Cunha's, the store's workers were gathered in the big windows watching the fire with equally worried and scared expressions.

Finally after an hour of firefighting, the smoke from inside the old store started to turn white. The sun had set by then and a marine layer had moved into downtown, mixing the fog with the smoke and steam from the fire. The lights from the fire trucks illuminated the water arcs and the hollow windows on which they were trained. At some point just after dark the south wall of Cunha's, which was brick, collapsed inward and it was clear the second story of the building had been totally gutted by the fire.

Half Moon Bay is a small community and Cunha's was a social as well as a commercial center. Everybody shopped there at some time or other. People knew the clerks and the owner so when it was going up in smoke everybody was being touched.

Looking around the scene, you saw the local fire fighters and police officers working their training on a major disaster, and in the crowds of bystanders on the sidewalks you saw your friends and familiar faces. Your eyes briefly locked in recognition and you saw everybody was feeling the weight of what was happening around you.

It was a human thing—something that you all shared was being destroyed.

100 Years Ago—Pescadero on Fire

—Ellen Chiri



Tim Duarte, the fourth generation of family at Duarte's Tavern, in front of the original backbar –Ellen Chiri

In 1926 Prohibition was in full swing on the Coastsides when a spark met a kerosene lantern, and suddenly the town of Pescadero was aflame. With no local fire department, the citizens fought the fire with a bucket brigade, carrying water from Pescadero Creek until the Redwood City Fire Department arrived.

Buildings on the west side of Stage Road were in flames, including the new Williamson's store, Gianola's Saloon, and the White Palace Market. Across the road from the flames stood Duarte's Tavern.

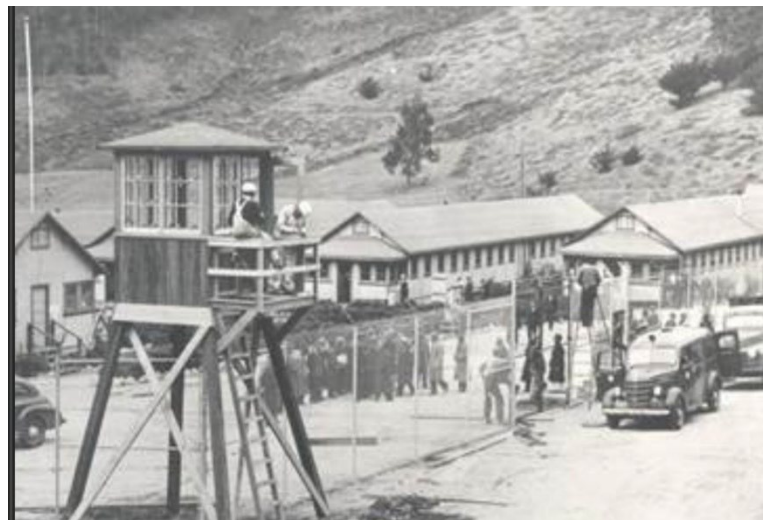
"Some of the townspeople had kept their heads in the midst of all the smoke, heat and panic," wrote Tess Black in her book Duarte's Tavern. With strength in numbers, they pulled a town treasure into the street as a precaution—Frank Duarte's original, immense backbar.

Don't Miss Our Spring Program! Sharp Park Detention Center—World War II on the San Mateo County Coast

**Wednesday June 17 - 6:00 PM. Half Moon Bay Library
620 Correas St, Half Moon Bay. Doors open at 5:30 PM**

A little-known part of local coast history lies in an isolated canyon in Pacifica—the site of a U.S. government World War II detention center that once housed thousands of “enemy aliens” who were deemed potentially dangerous. Laura Del Rosso of the Pacifica Historical Society will discuss the Sharp Park Detention Center and its impact on Japanese, Italian, and German communities during a time of fear and suspicion.

Laura is a Pacifica native whose Italian family emigrated first to Half Moon Bay more than 100 years ago. A former news reporter for the Pacifica Tribune, she is a freelance writer and member of the Sharp Park Memorial Committee.



President's Message

—Bill Scholtz, President

Some of the disasters featured in this issue are familiar to many of us, including the Cunha Country Store fire, the CZU Lightning Complex fires, and the devastating 1906 earthquake. Most of the other stories, however, are little known today, despite the impact they had on the Coastside and its residents.

While some of our articles build upon the work of earlier historians, much of what we publish is the result of original research conducted by our volunteers. Through their efforts, important stories that might otherwise be forgotten are preserved and shared with our community.

The work of the Association would not be possible without our volunteers. Whether serving as a docent, conducting research, assisting with archives, or helping in other ways, each person makes a valuable contribution.

I encourage you to consider joining us because our Coastside history is too important to lose. Together we can ensure these stories are preserved for future generations.

Volunteer Opportunities—Join Us!

Are you interested in the history of the San Mateo County Coastside? We welcome volunteers!

- Volunteer at the Coastside History Museum and historic jail to share our stories with visitors from near and far
- Research and write articles for *Coastside Chronicles*, our quarterly publication
- Research and archive photos and other memorabilia for our collection of artifacts
- Join the Education committee to share the Coastside's unique stories and culture with students
- Help with fundraising and membership events and activities

To learn more, contact us at volunteer4history@gmail.com

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!

Visit the Coastside History Museum at 505 Johnston Street, Half Moon Bay, CA—open weekends, 10:30am to 4:30pm

Click [here](#) to see 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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Coastside Time Traveler

In the early 20th century, there were nineteen school districts on the Coastside because you needed to be within walking distance of school. Like this one, most were one-room schoolhouses.

What school is this, where is it, when was it built and when was it closed?

If you have the answer, email us at hmbhacollections@gmail.com. We will let you know if you are correct and we will post the answer in the next edition of the Chronicles.

