

Miramar: Small Town/Big History

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Miramar: Small Town/BIG History

At a recent meeting of the Half Moon Bay Association, one of the volunteer docents made a comment that a family member once told her that the Coastside doesn't have any history.

I beg to differ.

Miramar is known for its restaurants and sunsets. With a population just over 2,000 people, it seems a sleepy, upscale, nice place to visit.

It wasn't always the case, and I've found artifacts to prove it.

This small section of the coast has seen human activity for thousands of years. Inhabited by first nation people, it also had a place in Spanish Mission history, in the earliest days of the town of Halfmoon Bay, played a role during prohibition, and in California defense during World War II. Not bad for a small section of the coast.

The Chiguan

Although there is debate on how long humans have lived in North America, we can confidently state that people have called our coast home for thousands of years. Bay Area tribes were collectively called the Ohlone, a loose group of 50 or so tribes. The local tribe was the Chiguan, and they had two main village sites, Ssatumnumo (now Princeton-by-the-Sea), and Chagunte (located around Half Moon Bay).



Each tribe had between 50-500 members, and tribes would intermingle and intermarry. Tribal life was focused on family, community, and nature. Far from being primitive, we know that tribes managed local land, creating controlled burns of the hills. In fact, early Spanish visitors to our area commented on how barren our hillsides were; the burns spurred growth of native grasses which were used for food, medicine, basket and building materials.

Tribes traded, bringing in non-native materials such as obsidian for use in tools. The Chiguan tribe had abundant resources for food, but also desirable materials for trade. Shells pre-date coins as a form of currency. The *Olivella biplicate* is a species of marine snail whose shells can be found today along our beaches. These shells were dried to produce beads, which were bartered for goods. Shell beads have been tested for age and found to be thousands of years old.



Left:
Projectile Point
Found after a storm near Miramar Beach
Dated 3,500 – 7,000 years old
Material: Red Chert
Author's partner's collection/
Mitch Madarish, found 2021



Right:
Olivella Shells found on our local beach

The Spanish

Francisco Gali sailed past the coast of Half Moon Bay in 1585 but did not stop. It is not recorded if locals saw or noted his ship. He took note of San Francisco Bay but did not land or explore. In fact, it would take almost 200 more years for the Spanish to arrive on our coast, ultimately bringing disaster to native tribes and their way or life.

The Spanish had held California for centuries, but not occupied it; by the late 1700s there was concern that Russian fur traders and British interests would begin encroaching, and so sent explorers to locate the almost mythical perfect bay. In 1769 the Castilian Gaspar de Portola – the first Spanish governor of California - marched his men up the state and through our coast to an area now known as Sweeny Ridge. The did record that they encountered native peoples, some wearing red and white paint. On November 4, 1769, they first cited San Francisco Bay.

By 1776 both Mission Dolores and the military base known as the Presidio were established.



Marker erected in 1968 on Sweeny Ridge, the site of the first sighting of San Francisco Bay by the men of Gaspar de Portola's party. It is made of our state stone, Serpentine.

The missions were owners of large herds of cattle and horses, which they allowed to freely graze in the hills south of San Francisco and down the coast. Sanchez Adobe in Pacifica was a southern outpost of the Mission system, and two corrals were located near present-day Miramar. Many native people were employed as vaqueros to help manage the herds. The outlet of a stream that trickled down from Mt. Montara, a stream soon to be known as the Arroyo de en Medio, was supposedly used for herding cattle for slaughter.



The mouth of the Arroyo has recently undergone restoration due to erosion. A familiar site to many of us locals, it has a rather nefarious history.

The Mexican Era

Mexico fought, won, and declared its independence from Spain in 1821. The Mission system by then was crumbling and was soon to be broken up by the new government. Things were shifting, and men in high places sought to seize the opportunity. Francisco Guerrero, Candelario Miramontes, and Tiburcio Vasquez, who was the Supervisor of livestock at Mission Dolores, all applied for and were granted land grants on our Coast. The stream Arroyo de en Medio gained its name in this period, becoming the dividing line between the land grants of Vasquez and Guerrero.

Through much of the 1820s and 30s these men were absentee landlords, residing instead in Yerba Buena (San Francisco). However, rising tension between Mexico and the United States caused Vasquez to flee and settle in a village known as San Benito (now Half Moon Bay). Side note: Tiburcio was shot dead on April 12, 1863, while sitting in a HMB Saloon. It was thought that he was murdered because he had testified in a land fraud case. The killer was never caught.

Medio Creek



America, California, and Amesport

The Mexican/Californio era was short-lived, as the United States gained victory over Mexico in 1848 and seized the land that where we now live. After gold was discovered in 1848, California statehood soon followed. Americans settling in San Benito called the village “Spanishtown”, a name that stuck for 50 years. The coast’s population grew, swelling with new arrivals, and our fertile soil grew a bounty of crops such as potatoes, lettuce, and grains. These were painstakingly, and dangerously, hauled over the hill to waiting markets in the booming town of San Francisco.

In 1856 a veteran of the Mexican-American war named Josiah P. Ames moved to the coast. Ames became county treasurer and saw an opportunity. Ames thought that our produce could be quickly moved via ship. Although there was Old Landing pier in Princeton Harbor, it was falling into disrepair. With two investors he built a warehouse and pier next to Arroyo de en Medio and a small village named Amesport was born.

The pier was 1,000 feet long, built of local timber embedded into the beach cliff. It boasted rails so that wagonloads of produce could be hauled out via mule to awaiting steamships.



Josiah P. Ames, Englishman by birth

The adjacent warehouse in Amesport measured 300 feet x 100 feet and was able to hold a great stock of grain and produce. It had a rail running up the middle and out to the pier. Farmers brought wagons of goods from as far away as San Gregorio to ship their goods. Steam ships stopped regularly, a few times a month during harvest, to pick up grains and produce for eager SF markets. In the small, colorful village of Amesport a saloon was established, serving locals and thirsty sailors. At full capacity 1,000 sacks of grain per hour could be loaded onto ships. In the 1870s life was booming for Amesport.



Old photo of Amesport pier showing goods being transported by horse on a cart attached to a rail. A steamship awaits.

Tales were told about the village, of the misfits, abalone divers, sea captains, sailors that used to frequent the busy wharf. Stories are archived that say as many as three ships would be waiting to load and unload at the same time. Steamships delivered goods too; coal was imported from as far away as England.

A man named John Mullen ran the operation, a job so prestigious that nearby Medio Creek was called Mullen's Creek by locals. Mullen lived in a home constructed of redwood, walking distance from the pier near the present location of Miramar Farms.



Above: 1970s photo of the Mullen House

Right: Bottle found in the cliff near the pier; Thompson's Eye Wash was made in Connecticut and was likely brought to our coast via steamer. (It contained Opium and was a quack cure! This bottle circa 1880s.)



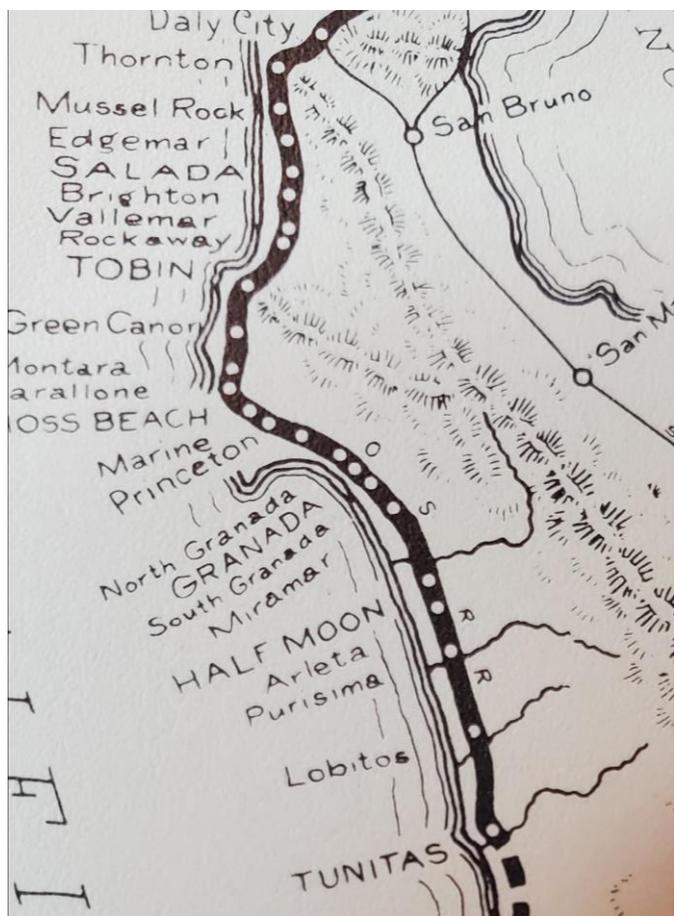
It is said that all good things come to an end, and so it holds true for the Josiah's involvement with his namesake pier. Unpredictable weather sometimes prevented ships from coming in. By the late 1870s a worm destroyed the futures for our main crop, potatoes. Steamers stopped with much less frequency at Amesport, meaning losses. Ames sold the business to the Pacific Coast Steamship Company and moved from Half Moon Bay to be appointed warden of San Quentin prison in the 1880s.



1896 photo of the headquarters of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company at First and Market in San Francisco.

The Ocean Shore Railroad Makes a Change

The Amesport warehouse briefly housed the Half Moon Bay Soda Works and other businesses, but Amesport was coming to an end. Farmers complained about the undependable service at the Amesport Wharf, and the little village had a bad reputation. By the late 1800s, prominent San Francisco financiers combined to bring prosperity to the coast, and the Ocean Shore Railroad was born. The coast was buzzing with excitement.



Below: Half Moon Bay Soda Works bottles found in an eroding Miramar Beach cliff. Author's collection.

Far Left:
Map of Ocean Shore



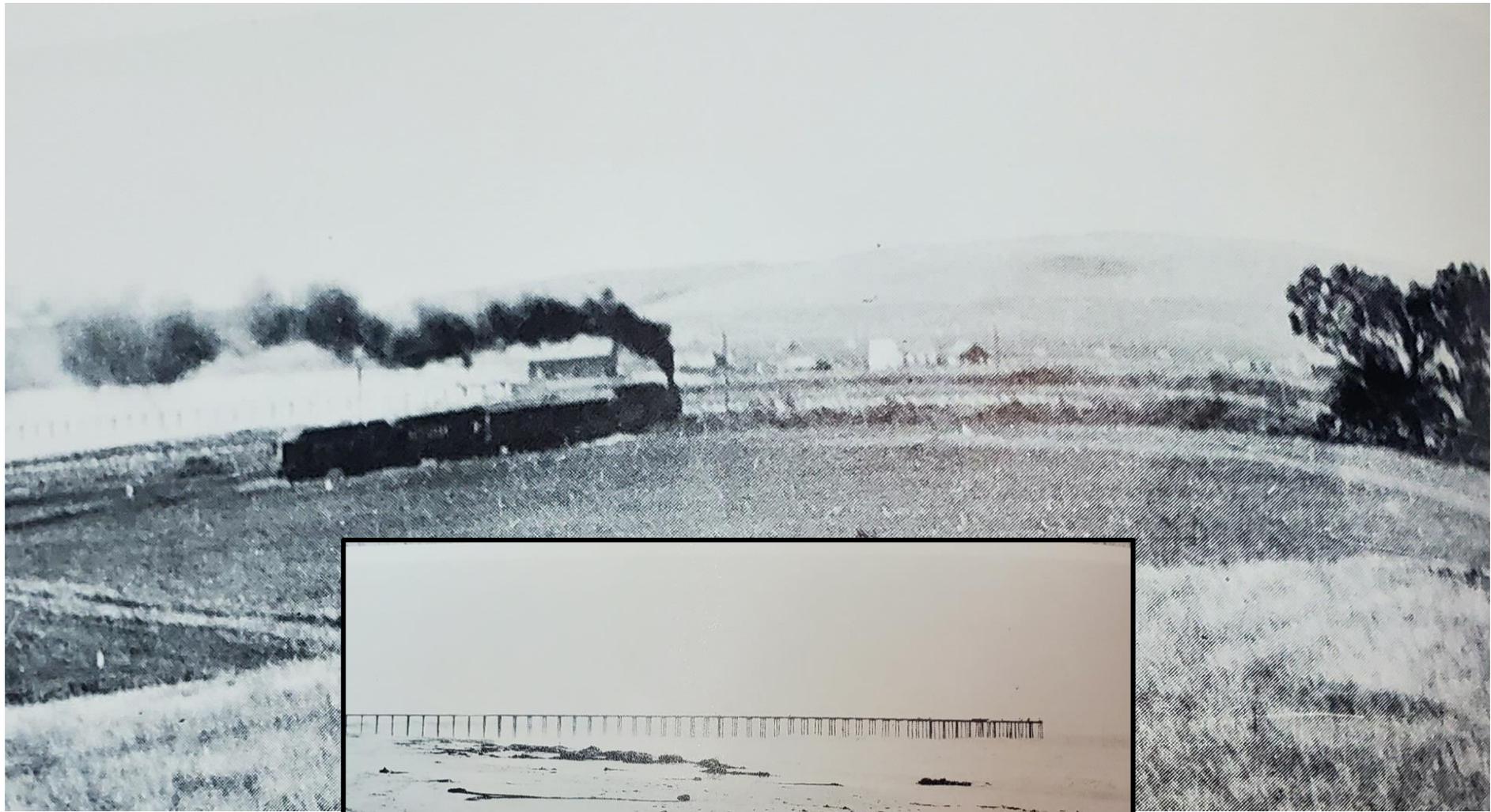
The Ocean Shore Railroad would run from the Mission District to Santa Cruz. Its aim was to attract prosperous San Francisco residents who would travel to our beaches for day trips, or who would invest in a property in Granada, the jewel of the coast, a town being designed for the railroad by famed landscape architect D. H. Burnham. The seedy village of Amesport did not fit into this vision, and so was rechristened with the romantic name of Miramar.

The Pacific Steamship Company ceased shipment pick-ups from the wharf around 1900, losing its business to the rails.



Left: Ocean Shore Railroad advertisement

Right: Pre-1890 H. Kennedy Ginger Beer bottle shard from Glasgow; found by the author in Miramar after a storm; shown sitting on the pier's remains. We have found a cache of seltzer and whiskey bottle bits likely from the former location of the Amesport wharf.



Large photo above: Ocean Shore Railroad heading north up the coast. You can see a hint of the Amesport pier in the background.

Inset: 1,000' pier as seen from north of Amesport.

Joseph Miguel and the Place Miramar



‘Notice, this is a private wharf, positively no persons allowed to fish from this wharf with out permission for information inquire at the Palace Miramar Hotel. J.S. Miguel, owner.’ He was also known as the potato king in 1912. Most of the potatoes sold in San Francisco came from Half Moon Bay. In 1910, the Pacific Coast Steamship Company warehouse (located at the end of the Miramar pier) was also at one time a skating rink.

The Pacific Steamship Company put the warehouse and pier up for sale in 1914.

Joseph Miguel may have been called the potato king, but his descendants, who still reside on the coast, know he was an artichoke farmer. His fields were near the pier, on the eastern side of where Highway 1 now runs. He knew the building and land was for sale and made a bid to buy it and several lots around it that bordered the Medio Creek. The initial real estate boom of the early century, caused by excitement over the coming of the train, had cooled making land prices drop.

Miguel knew the pier well, having shipped his goods from the wharf back in the day. He told his son Louie a story about driving his horse-drawn wagon down the pier once only to have it collapse in the center, causing his load and wagon to fall into the ocean. His horse was drowned, his goods were lost, but Miguel luckily escaped with his life.



Found on Miramar Beach on the same day: A horseshoe and horse's tooth. Could these be from Joseph's poor steed?

Joseph had a plan to build a grand hotel. He tore down the warehouse, re-using the timber, and hired the architect William A. Toepke to draw up his plans.

From a 1977 letter written by Joseph's son Louis to local historian June Morall:

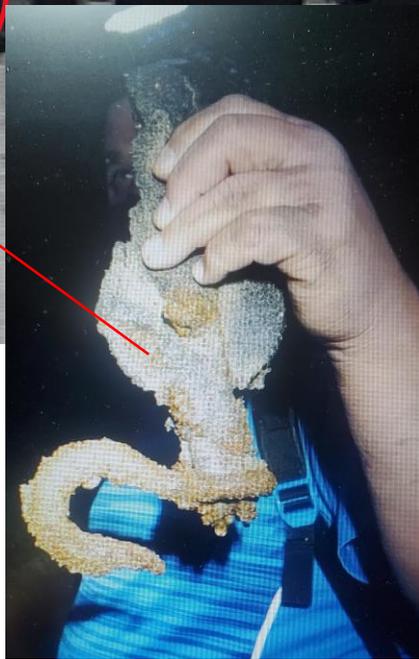
“By this time the pier was in need of repair, and many piles had to be replaced. The piles were logs about 100’ feet long and weighing two or more tons. They were eucalyptus and came from the hills of El Granada. ... The excavation for the swimming pool and cellar was all done by hand. The swimming pool was 20’ by 40’ and 10 feet deep at one end. Salt water was pumped from the ocean via a pipeline and was heated by a circulating oil furnace. The building of the Hotel was all done by day labor. Carpenters at that time received \$2.50 a day and the foreman was paid \$3 a day.”

In 1916, the hotel opened, the largest on the coast, with a wide beach in front and a pier for strolling and fishing.

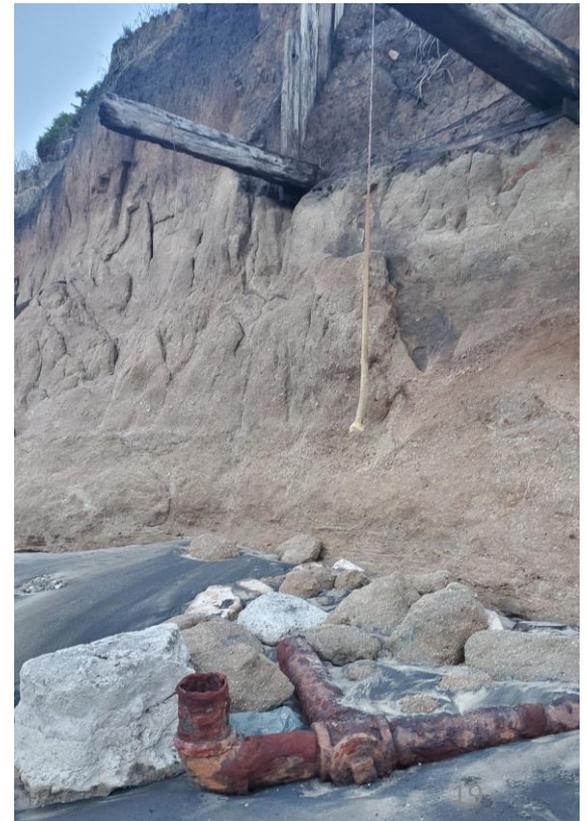




There appears to be construction in this photo, so it is early, although the woman's clothes appear more 1920 than 1916. Note the gate still exists on the entrance to the pier, and scars from the rails are still very visible. There is no safety railing!



After a large storm in December 2020, the beach near the pier was stripped down to near bedrock. Pipes, likely from the saltwater pool came into view. We recovered a hook and winch at the exact location of the crane in this photo. We were able to remove rust, enabling it to move once more.



The 1906 earthquake took its toll on the finances of the Ocean Shore Railroad. As the 20th century moved forward, the advent of automobiles spelled the end. Produce could be trucked to the city via the San Pedro Road. Visitors to the coast could drive over the hill to the beach. After just two decades it ran out of cash and folded, its tracks were pulled up by 1922.

At first the hotel had attracted rail day-trippers, but soon guests were driving to this destination. After World War I America became enamored with all things motorized, and motorcycle races were held on Miramar's wide expanse of beach.



Above: A later photo showing safety rails added to the pier.

Right: Motorcycle mania





Motorcycle racing on the wide Miramar Beach, circa 1920s.
Note the pier, Palace Miramar, and Arroyo in the background.

Prohibition and Maymie Crowley

Just north of the location of the Palace Miramar stands the Miramar Beach Inn. It is a lovely restaurant with a sunset ocean view, but it has a past. Maymie was a fiery redheaded woman who moved into the inn in 1918. In the 1920s the place would have been hopping, cars lined across the wide expanse of parking overlooking the beach. With a bar and restaurant downstairs and rooms upstairs, it was a cozy beachfront location. However, stories exist that some of the rooms were rented to “working girls” who were passing through the coast (always claiming to be stenographers, according to one agent.)

During Prohibition several locations along our foggy coast became drop off points for illegal liquor imported from Canada, including Miramar. There are records of the Miramar Beach Inn being raided; there were secret cabinets in the building designed for hiding booze from the “pro-hi” agents.

Maymie in front of her establishment.



Maymie could look out of her windows and see the rumrunners, or agents, if she wanted to, so there is no record of how much, if anything, was seized from the Inn.

Many old timers claim that booze was brought ashore and hidden in the Arroyo along Medio Creek. People were still searching for it in the 1980s. I've spoken to a man who was a teen in the 1960s and who claims to recall seeing bottles emerging from under the sand in the area.

NOT evidence of illegal booze, this bottle dates from 1934, the year after Prohibition was repealed.
Found March 2022.



World War II and Camp Miramar

The second World War brought changes to the coast. Citizens of German, Italian or Japanese origin were not allowed west of Main Street, even if they had jobs or needed to attend school. There was a heavy coastal military presence, and a base at the lighthouse in Montara. Many structures were commandeered, such as the location where Cameron's is now; it housed officers. So too was the Palace Miramar. The hotel and surrounding land, including a small Miramar schoolhouse (located near present day Highway 1 and Valencia) became Camp Miramar.

On April 21, 1943 Camp Miramar was officially established by the 125th Infantry Regiment of the US Army. In addition to the permanent structures, wooden barracks were set up.

Camp Miramar was short-lived. Deemed redundant due to the base at nearby Montara, it was closed within a year. Men in uniform did leave traces of their presence - a reminder of how scary that time must have seemed to local residents.

Wine Bottle with 1943 date code found eroding at the cliff site of Camp Miramar in 2020



WWII Army Officer's button, found on Miramar Beach 2018



Albert's Miramar

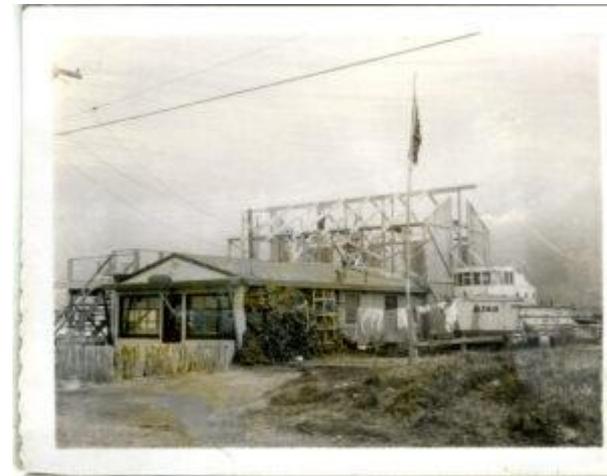
After the war the Miguel family sold the resort hotel, and it was purchased by Albert Schmidt and his wife Eva, who had run a restaurant in Burlingame . The 1950s saw some of the glamour and prosperity of the earlier days return to Miramar. I've spoken to one long-time coastal resident who used to work at the hotel, where it was known for its food, like crab cioppino. Although the ornate bar – originally from the Spreckels Mansion in San Francisco, remained, a lot of the hotel was run down and had to be restored. The once-proud pier was rotting away, leaving only the stumps of the supports.



The land changes and a music vibe is born

The jetty was constructed in Princeton Harbor in 1959-60, and it changed the tides of the sea. By 1970, the cliffs were eroding at the rate of 12 feet a year. The expanse of parking in front of The Miramar Inn was gone, replaced by riprap to prevent further damage. The once wide sand beach was gone, as was the old town road that hugged the edge of the cliff through the town.

But Miramar remained a destination. In 1964 the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society began presenting live Sunday Jazz, the Bohemian vibe fitting with the history of the village. It remains a great live music venue.



Eroding cliffs, looking south towards Miramar from Surfer's Beach, circa 1970

Old photo of the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society Douglas Beach House (from their web site)

Not The End

Eva and Albert decided to retire and sell the resort. On September 2, 1967, the Palace Miramar burnt down. I've spoken to the wife of a firefighter who was there that day, and there were rumors of arson – all booze had been removed from the bar.

In the 1970s the large billboard advertising the Palace near Medio Creek was torn down.

All that remains of the pier now are wooden beams jetting out from the cliff. On extreme low tides I have seen pieces of the supports emerge from the sand, but those sightings are rare. I always say hello to the pier and tell any nearby beachcombers a little about its history; it too will soon be but a memory, as the next storm could erode it away.

Most people would never guess that this sleepy area has such a salty past.



Palace Miramar billboard being pulled down in the 1970s.

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But Wait, There's more

The Palace Miramar was rumored to be haunted.

There were reports of a black hooded, caped figure that would be seen by employees.

Chandeliers would swing as if being blown by unseen wind. Rooms 6 and 7 would be unoccupied, but the flicker of candlelight could be seen under the doors.

Was it the specter of a sailor, a serviceman? After the fire, did it remain on the land?

Is it still calling Miramar home?