

Coastside Chronicles

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“No new vegetable has ever made so rapid an inroad to the market as the artichoke.”

L. Casazza, New York merchant

HALF MOON BAY
HISTORY
ASSOCIATION

Celebrating Coastside Legacies

From the President

—Juliette Applewhite

We have exciting updates for you this month. Our local contractor, Jamie Verdura, began the challenge of building our beautiful new museum out of the historic barn/garage in July, and has made significant progress. His team has found some great examples of older construction nails, and we look forward to displaying them in the museum in 2021. We are very grateful to Jamie for his dedication to preserving as much of the original material and appearance as possible in our new state-of-the-art museum. In addition to using recycled wood where possible, the new museum will feature green technology that includes solar panels to provide all power.

We were fortunate to receive a donation of commemorative coins of the Ocean Shore Railroad from Linda and Peter Kroosz. The Education Team plans to show them to third-grade classes when COVID-19 restrictions allow, to encourage discussion of our Coastside transportation history.



The new museum: beams in place, framing complete!

Our wonderful docents are back at work keeping the jail museum open. We're open Saturdays and Sundays from noon to 2p.m.—longer, if docents are available. We're also open the first Thursday of each month from 4 to 6p.m (through November), as part of the monthly Make It Main Street event.

We look forward to more progress through 2021.



Half Moon Bay, the Mob, and the Artichoke Wars

—Marc Strohle

Gangsters, the mob, violence, intimidation—it sounds like big-city drama, except that the star attraction was the humble artichoke, and the setting was Half Moon Bay!

The edible thistle was first commercially farmed in El Granada by Dante Dianda in the 1860s. The first coastal artichokes were sent to the east coast in 1904, sold to Italians in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey from push-carts and markets, and became the unlikely protagonist in the “artichoke wars” on the San Mateo Coast, later in the 1930s.

As the market grew, the Half Moon Bay Artichoke Association was founded in 1917, with John L. Debenedetti as manager and chief organizer. He quickly discovered that big profits were to be made, not at home, but in the Northeast where Italian Americans would pay ten to twenty times the local price of a nickel a piece. Debenedetti embarked on a mission—personally finding and visiting new wholesalers as the market exploded.

Farmers shipped crates of artichokes cross-country in newly invented refrigerated rail cars. In 1921, the Fannie Farmer Cookbook featured recipes for boiled and deep-fried artichokes served with bechamel or hollandaise sauce. One merchant, L. Casazza, told the New York Times that “No new vegetable has ever made so rapid an inroad to the market as the artichoke.”

Unfortunately the successful and lucrative nature of the business attracted the wrong attention when Ciro Terranova, member of the Morello-Terranova crime family, noticed the profit potential.

Terranova earned his nickname “the Artichoke King” by buying all the artichokes that entered New York, then selling them for three times more than he paid for them.



Ciro Terranova
“Artichoke King”

Terranova had already gained an unsavory reputation, as newspapers described him as a “food rackets emperor,” specializing in difficult-to-acquire vegetables. He virtually engineered artichoke racketeering, becoming the brains and the brawn of the operation.

Terranova was born in Corleone, Sicily. Moving to the United States with his parents and family, they finally settled in New York in 1896. He became an underboss to the Morello crime family and ran lucrative gambling, booze, and union-fixing rackets. Terranova lived a flashy lifestyle and drove around in an armored sedan with bullet-proof windows. His infamous “friends” included Al Capone and Charles “Lucky” Luciano.

At first, the family imposed an “informal” import tax of \$25 to \$50 (\$600 to \$1,200 in today’s money) per carload. The “tax” was enforced using typical mob tactics including cracking the heads of uncooperative merchants. One seller who refused to deal with Terranova had four of his drivers abducted and beaten.

By the 1920s, newspapers reported mafia agents in California, there to intimidate growers into restricting crop sizes, while selling to the mob at reduced prices. Terranova’s thugs forced growers to sell their artichokes exclusively to Terranova, who, it’s estimated, was making as much as \$500,000 a year. →

In 1930, the “artichoke wars” began in earnest when thugs invaded the fields of non-cooperating growers with machetes, laying waste to their crops, while others wearing masks hijacked trucks carrying artichokes.

San Mateo Sheriff James McGrath sent deputies armed with shotguns to stand guard over fields, and growers organized gangs of “artichoke vigilantes” in Princeton, yet over \$100,000 in damage was done in 1930 alone.

Even trainloads of artichokes that were crossing the continent were at risk, as armed mobsters stopped trains and forcibly removed the cargo, beating guards hired to protect the freight.

Finally, on December 21, 1935, New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia announced that starting on December 26th, the city would make the “sale, display, and possession” of artichokes illegal, claiming that the artichoke represented “a serious and threatening emergency to the city,” being that its availability was controlled by “a monopoly of doubtful legality,” referring to the mafia.

LaGuardia went on to say, “I like artichokes,” but the ban “will remain in force until the grip of the racketeers is broken.”

A New York Tribune reporter wrote, “It is impossible not to conclude that the world today is a bit mad.”



LaGuardia had been elected, in part, based on promises to deal with mob activity. The artichoke wars gave him a golden opportunity for grandstanding with little risk.

Terranova had become marginalized after losing his nerve during a mob hit at a Coney Island restaurant in 1931. He was forced to relinquish most of his operations, including artichokes. Moreover, the mob had shifted its focus to the more lucrative pursuits afforded by prohibition.

There was such a furor over the artichoke ban that it was lifted in less than a week.

LaGuardia garnered flashy headlines, portraying himself as hard at work pursuing the mafia.



The whole affair made artichokes more popular than ever, as they became front-page news, while newspapers and magazines were packed with recipes encouraging people across the nation to try the vegetable. Ironically, nearly everyone prospered except for the criminals, proving that crime truly doesn't pay—at least for long.

For his part, Terranova became regarded as a joke and was essentially banned from New York, ending his criminal aspirations. He died of a stroke in 1938, aged 49, the only one of the four Terranova brothers to die in a bed. The New York Times announced, “former power in artichoke trade penniless as paralysis ends his life.”

So the next time you savor an artichoke leaf dipped in melted butter, or Mayor LaGuardia's favorite—hollandaise sauce—think of the trials, tribulations, and bravery of the Coastside artichoke farmers who dared to fight back against the mob, and the farmers today who continue to bring us this aristocrat of vegetables.



Who is That Hovering Above Miramar Beach?

—Martin Koughan

It seems ready to take flight, the ghostly figure surmounting the distinctive A-frame located above Miramar Beach where the Arroyo de la Medio spills into the Pacific.

Most people see an angel, but it is actually someone with a higher celestial rank.

The apparition with his arms outstretched is Odin, king of the Viking gods. Known as the God of Creation in Norse mythology, Odin was also the god of art, culture, and wisdom, the patron of artists and poets.

The sculpture is the work of artist/photographer Michael Powers, in an homage to his Viking roots. He conceived the A-frame over which Odin presides—which was originally called The Temple—as a refuge for musicians, artists, writers and poets.

The entire compound—which includes three geodesic domes—is constructed using natural materials from local forests, recycled salvage and random treasures that wash up on Miramar Beach.



The A-frame is built in the style of a Norwegian stave church—using poles or “staves” —and was constructed starting in 1973 using long eucalyptus trunks harvested from the hills above El Granada. The main timbers in the A-frame are from an old water tower that once stood next to Cabrillo Highway.

Inside the A-frame, the hood over the central fireplace is actually the shell of a World War Two harbor mine cut in half. Powers acquired it from a ship dismantler in Oakland.

The statue of Odin emerged from the need to encase the steel pipe chimney of that fireplace in cement. Powers carried the cement in five gallon buckets up a ladder bridge and gradually crafted the image of Odin one bucket at a time. Each bucket weighed nearly a hundred pounds. It took more than 150 trips to finish the job.

Powers says he built his compound “as a place for meditation and worship” where “creative types and searchers can get together and exchange energy. The whole center is dedicated to higher consciousness, healing and the maintenance of physical and spiritual health.”

Over the years, the compound has been home to recording studios, a photography studio, a yoga studio and a variety of artists and musicians as well as numerous spiritual gatherings including drum circles and sound healings.

At the exact center of the compound stands a 21-foot stone monolith built around a redwood log that was delivered by the tides on Miramar Beach.

“It must have taken years for it to wash through the river system and find its way into the ocean where I found it,” says Michael Powers, “To me that is something spiritual. Things happen as they should. So much of this place is suggested by the natural world around me. People often ask me, ‘Did you build this?’ I usually answer that I was just following orders.” ♦

Marion Quinlan Miramontes, Half Moon Bay's First Telephone Operator

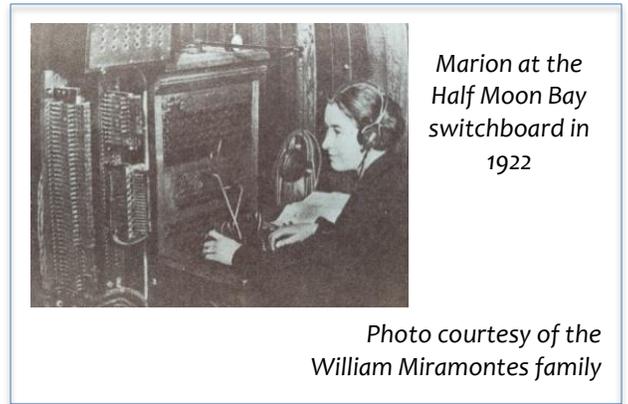
—Ellen Chiri

Marion Quinlan was born in Half Moon Bay in 1903. She attended local schools, and after two years in high school she got a job. “I worked in the telephone office in Half Moon Bay for three and a half years,” she said in a 1975 interview for the Spanishtown Historical Society. “At that time there was an agent here by the name of Mrs. Angie Francis, and I worked for her.... Moss Beach, Pescadero, and Half Moon Bay all had agents who were appointed by the phone companies and were the ones in charge of the offices.”

A telephone switchboard was called an exchange. Each exchange had a name that identified it, and each telephone on the system was given a set of numbers to go with the exchange name. The Half Moon Bay exchange was RAYmond 6, which continues today as the first Half Moon Bay prefix of 726.

When a caller picked up the phone it activated a cable, and the cable's associated lamp on the switchboard lit. Marion answered the incoming call “Number, please?” When the caller gave the number, Marion plugged the cable into the appropriately numbered jack, closing the circuit and ringing the called person's telephone.

If the number wasn't on Marion's switchboard, she transferred the call to the correct exchange—for example, to Moss Beach, whose exchange was PArkview 8. An operator at that switchboard rang the telephone of the person being called.



In 1925, Marion married Bill Miramontes. In her 1975 interview with Spanishtown Historical Society, she said “I knew him all my life and went to school with him. He's only eight months older than I am but I keep saying he's a year older!”

Bill “graduated from high school in 1921,” Marion said, “and then went to work in the oil fields. There were many companies drilling for oil around here at that time.” Standard Oil was one of the companies drilling for oil; Bill worked for them for 53 years, first as an oil driller, then delivering gas and oil to the Coastside.

When the couple bought property in town, “The man at the bank said, 'Marion, do you realize that you are moving right back on the Miramontes land?' ” The land was granted to Bill's great-grandfather Candelario Miramontes in 1841, and the town of Half Moon Bay grew up on what had been that land grant. ♦

Oral Histories

Does your family have a long Coastside history? Do you, or someone you know, have Coastside stories from long ago? Our Oral History team is gathering personal histories... may we add yours? Email us at info@halfmoonbayhistory.org !

A Gusher? Oil on the Coastside

—Ellen Chiri

In her 1975 interview with the Spanishtown Historical Association (quoted on page 5), Marion Quinlan Miramontes noted that her husband Bill “went to work in the oil fields” after graduating from Half Moon Bay high school in 1921. “There were many companies drilling for oil around here at that time,” she continued.

In a 1980 interview with author June Morrall, Bill Miramontes said, “I worked for Standard Oil for 53 years. There was just enough oil in the ground to encourage people to drill for more. They’ve been drilling here since before I was born... We drilled a well on Shoults Flat. It flowed for three, four days over the top. A very light quality of oil, like distillate... just a little pocket of oil.”

The first Coastside oil wells were drilled in the late 1800s, notably in the Purísima Canyon area. In the 1880s, news about Purísima oil was starting to seep out. In 1884, the *Redwood Gazette* reported that the Purissima Oil Company “...will commence sinking for oil on the land of George Shoults.” A follow-up story reported “...the Purissima Oil Company struck oil at 93 feet on the Shoults ranch.”

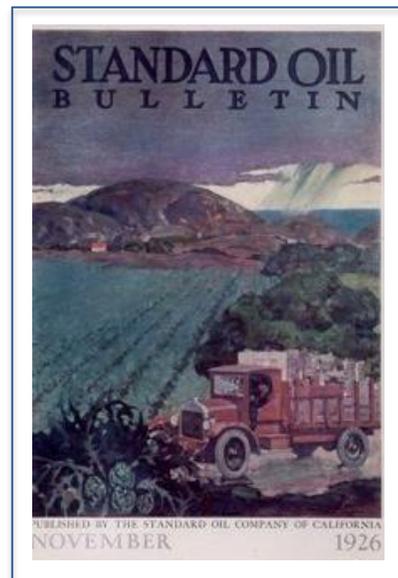
In 1890, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* quoted Coastside resident Woolston Banghart:

“Our oil wells are now producing five or six barrels a day each... There are of three of them, one on Purísima Creek... another three miles south of the town of Purissima, and the other near at hand... the deepest well is not down over 500 or 600 feet... there is quite a flow of natural gas out of these wells, too.”

Newspapers continued to publish encouraging reports of Coastside oil exploration. In 1902, the *Redwood City Democrat* enthused, “Coast-side Gusher: Valuable Flow of Petroleum Has Been Found in the Purissima Canyon”, and later, “Oil Flows at Purissima: Report of Big Strike on the Coastside is Confirmed.”

Over the years, new oil wells were proposed on agricultural land. Interest in drilling spiked in 1973, when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed an oil embargo against the United States. A San Mateo County ordinance enacted in the 1980s restricted new wells to non-prime farmland.

Today, only two operating oil wells remain. Both are in the Purísima Creek area, and both reportedly produce mere trickles of oil. Today’s few reminders of early Coastside oil enthusiasm are scattered bits of rusting equipment, and old newspaper stories. ♦



History Association commemorative plaque project



The Half Moon Bay History Association has been placing descriptive plaques on some of Half Moon Bay's historic buildings.

Look for them as you stroll around town!

History Mysteries

Do you have a Coastside history mystery you'd like us to investigate?

Let us know! Email us at info@halfmoonbayhistory.org

More Articles! Cool Videos!

Visit our website for more intriguing articles and videos about Coastside history: halfmoonbayhistory.org

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Help Preserve Coastside History

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.



Our mission is to educate as we preserve, honor, and celebrate Coastside history.

Let Us Hear From You

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