

Coastside Chronicles

A Publication of the Half Moon Bay History Association

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HALF MOON BAY
HISTORY
ASSOCIATION

*“... the would-be assassin walks
the street as confident of escaping
punishment as we are that
Christmas is coming.”*

True Crime on the Coastside

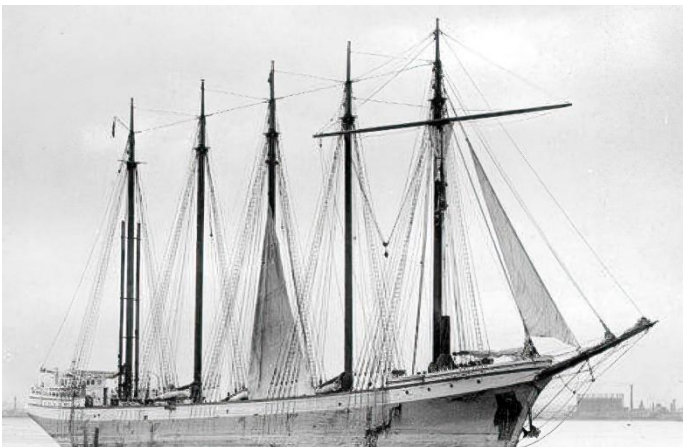
Visitors often see the Coastside as a calm backwater in the crowded and jostling San Francisco Bay Area. It may be, but it wasn’t always so. This issue of Coastside Chronicles gives us a look at general mayhem, robbery, and murder in days gone by. Read about an Indigenous renegade who rebelled against the mission system; murder during the wild west of the late 1800s; bootlegging battles during Prohibition; and a post-war tragedy.

Prohibition on the Coast—the Booze Wars

--Lea Morgan

War may seem an extreme term. However, when the details of the Prohibition years on the coast with machine guns, cannons, raids, shootouts, and even a submarine are described, the word ‘war’ may turn out be very appropriate.

As Prohibition landed in Half Moon Bay, the area was recovering from a significant setback. The promise of the Ocean Shore Railroad and the boom it would bring was fading. Due to the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake, steep



Malahat, a Canadian five masted schooner, is thought to have delivered more illegal alcohol to California than any other ship. She could carry as many as 60 thousand cases of whisky. Courtesy of the Port Alberni Maritime Heritage Society

costs, engineering challenges and the rising popularity of cars, the project was abandoned in 1920. Into this depressed atmosphere Prohibition came with the lure of money to be made.

Locals, moonshiners, local roadhouses and Canadian bootleggers converged to meet the demands of the San Francisco speakeasies and make their own fortunes. The Coastside was the ideal area to attract the adventurous. Its proximity to the ocean, topographic isolation and relatively easy access to San Francisco made it perfect. Pigeon Point lighthouse coves were a popular stash spot. The locals named the Pedro Mountain Road “Rum Runners Road” because bootleggers in high-speed cars dodged bullets from rivals to get to the speakeasies in San Francisco



Half Moon Bay area bootleggers in front of their stash location

Beaches, secluded canyons and foggy caves allowed farmers to hide alcohol, and for rum runners to make midnight dashes to the shore from the ships 12 miles, the legal limit, out in the ocean. Armed with flashlights and code books, smugglers would signal when it was clear for the small boats to come ashore. With so much money to be made competition was fierce. Everyone was looking to capitalize on the new opportunities, including farmers who had stocked up on alcohol before Prohibition went into effect (or who had made their own) and big Canadian whiskey companies. The War had started.

It was the federal government's Prohibition agents and the Coast Guard versus smugglers and bootleggers. Battles were fought along the coast. Año Nuevo, Pigeon Point, Pillar Point Harbor, and Moss Beach among others were frequently active landing spots. The wharf near Pescadero was a chief landing port from which the Canadian rum fleet ran, by some accounts, as much as \$12 million a year. Machine guns warned potential hijackers to stay away. In December of 1924 a group landed with \$20,000 worth of whiskey. They buried the whiskey and left to go back to the ship for more. Local residents who had been hiding and watching the smugglers dug up the whiskey and distributed it among the homes in Pescadero. When the smugglers came back ashore and found their stash stolen, they armed themselves and headed for town. They cornered locals and recovered their goods at gunpoint.

Before dawn in 1925, a shootout in Half Moon Bay resulted in a bootlegger victory. They were able to get away and reach Purissima where they reached co-conspirators waiting with a fresh car. That night they made it to San Francisco to make the delivery.

Another battle, this one at Pillar Point harbor. At the time there was no breakwater so John Patroni, who owned a roadhouse, had his own private pier. The wharf there was often used for illegal deliveries for a price. The boats transferred loads of booze from the Canadian ships to the wharf. On this occasion, they were expected. The government vessel pulled up alongside the wharf, turned on their lights, and opened fire. One shot blew the top of

Patroni's pier away. Smugglers surrendered that night. Pillar Point Harbor was even the site of a silent movie made by Peninsula Studios featuring a thrilling boat chase.

As the War progressed, raids were frequent. Boats and even specially outfitted cars had cannons. There was even a submarine rum runner!

While the gun battles were being fought during the Prohibition years, the Roaring 20s were in full swing on the Coast. There were roadhouses and speakeasies along the coast at various beaches. Just like the big city clubs, local clubs had alcohol, gambling, and women. Maymie Cowley, the very popular redhead, ran the Ocean Beach Tavern at Miramar all through Prohibition and beyond. She had revolving kitchen cabinets designed and installed to hide the alcohol. She may even have had a bordello upstairs where there were 10 small rooms. Maymie's place, Patroni's and others were raided often. However, in contrast, Frank's Place up the coast in Moss Beach was never raided. Frank Torres catered to a much different clientele such as silent movie stars, politicians, and Dashiell Hammett the writer. Mr Hammett even mentioned Half Moon Bay as a smuggling route in one of his Continental Op detective stories.

The repeal of Prohibition came in 1933 and the excitement vanished. Farmers went back to raising Brussel



Patroni's Wharf in the upper left and the Patroni House in the lower right



The Ocean Beach Tavern, today the Miramar Beach Restaurant, was a famous speakeasy and brothel run by Maymie Crowley. Until a remodel c1980s, it had a rotating bar to hide booze from the Feds



Frank's Place, today the Moss Beach Distillery

sprouts. Speakeasies became more conventional restaurants. If you want to know more about this exhilarating time on the coast, visit the ghost of the Blue Lady at Moss Beach Distillery ... she was there.

Pomponio—Outlaw, Hero

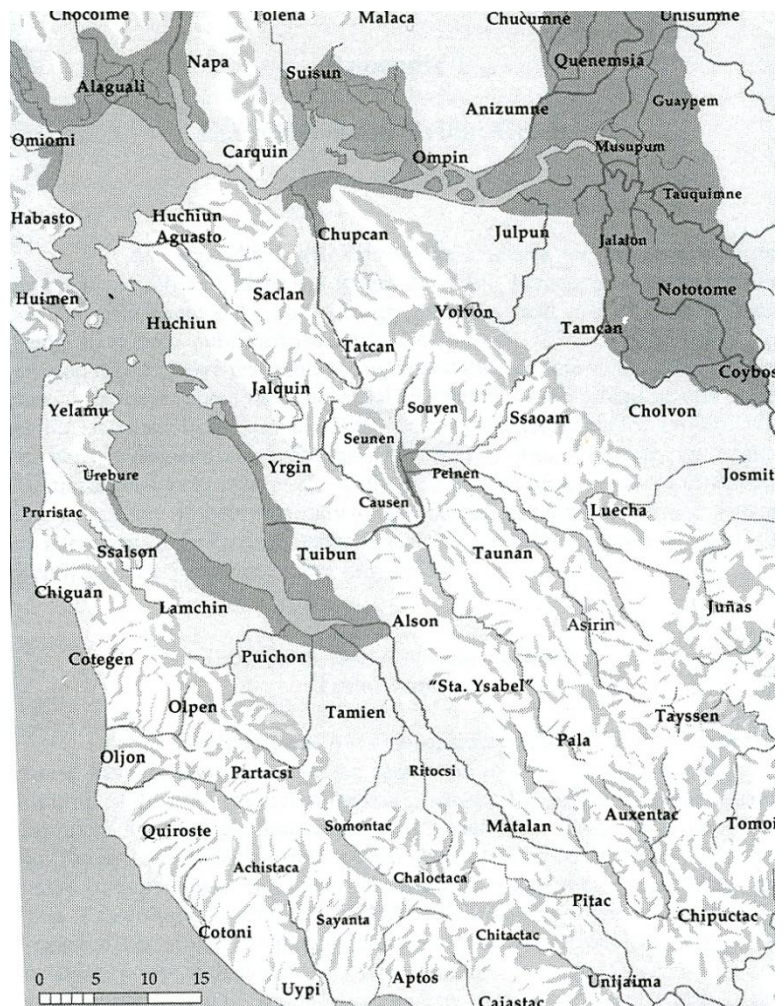
—Ellen Chiri

— Images courtesy of Mark Hylkema

Pomponio State Beach on the San Mateo County coast is named for José Pomponio Lupugeyum. A Coast Miwok from the Bolinas area born in 1803, he was four years old when his mother took him to Mission San Francisco de Asís. There, he was baptized and Christian (European) names were added to his birth name.¹

The many stories about Pomponio give us an image full of mystery, but we know that he resisted the mission system, terrifying Spanish colonists from 1821 until his death in 1824.

One story tells us that by 1820 his entire family had died from illness, which must have led him to question the validity of Spanish authority. He had been “...put in a position of responsibility at the San Rafael outpost²...” but he became a renegade and fled the servitude of the missions.



Pre-colonial Bay Area's Indigenous population

The mission system

When Spanish explorers came through the San Francisco Bay region in the late 1700s the land was populated by many Indigenous tribes.

The explorers claimed the land for the Kingdom of Spain, and a network of 21 missions was instituted to colonize Alta California. The first mission, Mission San Diego de Alcalá, was founded in 1769.

By 1776 Mission San Francisco de Asís, also called Mission Dolores, was established. The last mission was founded in Sonoma in 1823, after Mexico's independence from Spain.

Indigenous people suffered tremendously under the mission system. They died in vast numbers from foreign diseases such as influenza and measles. They lost lifeways including language, beliefs, and traditional ceremonies; they suffered loss of honor.

Homelands became grazing land for mission cattle—livestock trampled the grasslands, destroying seed crops that were a vital part of the people's foods. Seed crops were also reduced by the missions' outlawing of traditional fire-management practices. The numbers of traditionally hunted animals such as elk were reduced as they competed with herds of cattle for forage. Water diverted from streams for mission farms reduced the fish population.

Lost food resources resulted in malnourishment, increasing the people's reliance on the missions.

Rebellion

As Indigenous people became part of mission settlements, renegades escaped in increasing numbers. Escapees were captured and returned for punishment. In 1806 visiting traveler George von Langsdorff wrote of a captured escapee "...he is bastinadoed and an iron rod of a foot or a foot and a half long, and an inch in diameter, is fastened to one of his feet³..."

Pomponio was an ambivalent figure, both a notorious outlaw and a heroic resistance fighter. A leader by most accounts, he organized a group from various missions to rebel against the colonial system. They called themselves Los Insurgentes—the insurgents.



Pomponio's cave hideout

Because he'd been raised at Mission Dolores, Pomponio knew where supplies were located. Los Insurgentes began raiding mission stores, stealing cattle and horses, and generally bedeviling the colonial population.

Los Insurgentes had hideouts scattered across the countryside as they evaded capture. One hideout was a cave in the vicinity of what is now Long Ridge Open Space Preserve east of Pescadero.

Inside the cave is a boulder etched with a cross. Archaeological interpretation tells us that it was carved by mission scouts to warn Pomponio that they were closing in on him.



A warning to Pomponio

Legends of Pomponio abound. According to one, he cut off his heels to escape his shackles when imprisoned at the Presidio. Others say it was Pomponio's lieutenant Gonzalo who cut off his own heels when imprisoned at Carmel Mission. Still others deny anyone cutting off any heels.

A farmer who grew up in San Gregorio told late author June Morrell that his favorite childhood story was of Pomponio having left behind a treasure of gold coins in a nearby canyon. "We always went down there as kids" he said. "I really believed that gold was buried in the hills."

Stories tell interesting versions of Pomponio's end. One insists that he was burned alive at Monterey. Another tells us that he was hanged from an oak tree near his cave hideout and that his ghost killed the tree.

In 1824 Pomponio killed a Mexican soldier and fled to what is now Marin County. He was captured by a Lieutenant Martínez of San Francisco, who recalled:

"...having captured a Christian Indian named José Pomponio...thirteen leagues to the north on the other side of the harbor...I had the honor of capturing him in the Cañada de Novato after an exchange of fire upon both sides..."⁴

Taken to Monterey and tried for the soldier's murder, Pomponio was executed by firing squad.

In his brief life Pomponio became almost mythical, and his legend lives on in names—a beach, a creek, a long-gone school, and even a former Boy Scout camp.

¹ *Native American Response and Resistance to Spanish Conquest in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1769-1846* by Gustavo Adolfo Flores Santis

² *South from San Francisco: San Mateo County California, Its History and Heritage* by Frank M. Stanger

³ Bastinado is a form of punishment or torture in which the soles of the feet are beaten with a stick. The quotation is from *A Time of Little Choice: The Disintegration of Tribal Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area 1769-1810* by Randall Milliken

⁴ Brown, Alan K. *Pomponio's World*, in *Argonaut*, (*San Francisco Westerners*)

“Sorely infested with thieves and gamblers” —The 1860s Coastside

—Bill Scholtz

Much of the 1860s Coastside had more in common with an old western movie than tranquil farming communities. According to the 1860 census, the citizens were born in 25 different countries thanks to spillover from the Gold Rush. By 1870, that number increased to about 40 (depending on how you count countries). In both censuses, the population was two-thirds men.

No man was far from a place to drink. The area around Half Moon Bay and where Miramar is today had at least six saloons. If the smaller communities to the south and east didn't have a saloon, they at least had a hotel that served liquor.

A letter about Spanishtown and Halfmoon Bay¹ printed in the November 3, 1860 edition of the *San Mateo Gazette*, signed by S. D. T., complained that the Redwood City-based paper didn't cover the communities over the hill on the coast. This was before the paper regularly printed letters from correspondents in coastal communities. The author of the letter wanted to inform the editor what life was like on the coast side of the hill.

After complaining about all the horse racing and whisky drinking, the author goes on to say:

“Our town is sorely infested with thieves and gamblers, and very unfortunately our Alcalde² resides several miles from town, so if any piece of villainy occurs, such a long time passes before a warrant is issued (if issued at all) that the culprits have time enough to get twenty miles from the place. But no notice is taken of a shooting or stabbing affray, more than that the perpetrator of the crime is complimented on his pluck, and he is permitted to run at large to murder the next man who may happen to tread upon his toes. Only a few nights since one of our “royal bloods” deliberately discharged his revolver in among a crowd; two men were wounded and one of them is hardly expected to survive. Nothing, however, is said of it, and the would-be assassin walks the street as confident of escaping punishment as we are that Christmas is coming.”

¹ Downtown Half Moon Bay was originally called San Benito. After the Americans arrived following the Gold Rush, they called it Spanishtown. The area outside of town from the south end of what is now Half Moon Bay to what is now Montara was called Halfmoon Bay, while the bay it was named after was spelled Half Moon Bay. In the 1870s the Post Office named the town Halfmoon Bay. As the towns to the north got their own names, Halfmoon Bay shrunk to what it is today. In the early 20th century, the spelling of Halfmoon Bay changed to what is today.

² Alcalde is Spanish for a mayor or magistrate who hold both administrative and judicial powers.

The author goes on to say that if an outsider commits a crime they are tied up and paraded through town before being sent on their way and told never to come back.

This article sounds like a bit of hyperbole and we are not able to verify anything the author said, however, based on combing the newspapers, it seems the author was not too over the top.

There are no statistics available, however, we found there were at least seven murders on the Coastside in the decade following the article. Based on census population, that works out to over 40 murders for every 100,000 people per year, which is 16 times higher than it is in San Mateo County today. Five of those murders were in and around Half Moon Bay and the other two were in Pescadero.

Murder of a store owner—February 10, 1861

Just over two months after the above letter to the paper was published, there was a murder in Spanishtown.

Jose Bifano, an Italian grocer who had a store on the corner of what is now Kelly and Purissima in Spanishtown was away from his store for most of the day on Sunday, February 10. Two Philippine laborers, Norberto Larosa and Victoriano Quinto had come into the store several times asking for him during the day until they finally connected with him between 7 and 8 pm. They talked for a short time and then purchased a piece of cheese. They started to walk out of the store without the cheese and Bifano followed them to give them



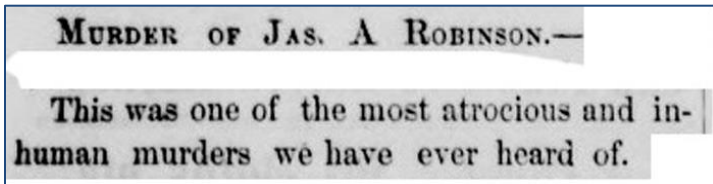
Bifano's store. Many stores also included saloons.

the cheese. At that point Larosa pulled a knife and tried to stab Bifano. Bifano grabbed the blade in his hand cutting it to the bone. Quinto then stabbed Bifano in the side rendering the fatal wound. The two men left and in about a half hour, Bifano was dead.

Several search parties went looking for the men. One led by J. W. Thompson, a miner, and Boynton, a saloon keeper, finally tracked the men down on Tuesday evening. They were found in a camp in the mountains with others from the Philippines. On Wednesday morning Thompson and Boynton got several people from Searsville (an old lumbering town that was flooded to create the Searsville Reservoir). to join them. Larosa was easily arrested but Quinto was hiding in a tent with a gun. After Quinto refused to come out the posse fired many shots into the tent. The tent was full of holes but miraculously Quinto was not killed.

It was thought that the murder was premeditated, however, the jury was not so sure and found them guilty of second-degree murder. Larosa was given a life sentence and Quinto, only 10 years. They were both sent to San Quentin.³

Shot through a window—May 23, 1861



Times Gazette, June 1, 1861

Just over three months after the Bifano murder, the Half Moon Bay area was rocked by another murder.

James A. Robinson, a native of England and about 42 years old, owned a ranch about three miles east of Spanishtown. On the night of the 23rd of May, around 7:30 pm, his two hired hands left for the post office in

Spanishtown, taking the dogs with them. Robinson was home alone making a biscuit for breakfast. In the morning, he was going to make an early start for San Francisco where his family lived. He was sitting near the window waiting for his biscuit to finish when someone from outside the window shot him through the glass. The murderer shot him with about fourteen buckshot in the head near the left eye. Based on the size of the wound, the shooter must have been only three feet away. The body was undisturbed. Nothing was taken, including the money Robinson had on him.

When the laborers returned, one of the dogs suffered convulsions and died. The assumption was that the murderer left poison in a tasty tidbit with him in case the dogs were still there.

The only motive anyone could think of was some kind of revenge. Robinson had been in a property dispute, but that had been settled some time ago.

According to the June 1, 1861 edition of the County Gazette, the district attorney C. N. Fox had told them that there was an important clue found at the scene of the crime, however, the sheriff's office refused to investigate. From the Gazette:

"To those superintended the duties of the office of Sheriff of this county, we must say, that with them rests whatever blame may attach because of the non-performance of these important duties. For those duties, gentlemen, you are paid, and the public expect those of you. If you cannot perform the duties of your office, resign, and give place to those who can."

We can find no mention of the Robinson murder after this.

³ We can thank the murder of Bifano for the fact that Half Moon Bay has a Kelly Avenue instead of possible a Bifano Avenue. Two months after Bifano's death, his widow Sacramento married Charles Kelly. This was just two years before the streets were laid out and given names.

Murder and lynching—February 1862

On the evening of the 23rd of February Thomas Marrion of Pescadero (originally of England) went out to visit a man named Ramon Larria and never returned. The next morning his body was found in Pescadero Creek. His skull was fractured in two places, likely from a blunt instrument, and his clothing had been removed.

Larria fled and three days later was tracked down by a posse in San Gregorio and he was returned to Pescadero. When he was found, he was in possession of Marrion's clothing. Larria was found hanged in a barn the next morning. The logical assumption was that he was lynched.

Lynching was so common in the United States before and after the 1860s that some newspapers had a euphemism for lynching, "Judge Lynch". The euphemism was not used in the articles about Larria, but it's not hard to find examples, especially during the Civil War when extra judicial violence surged.

Larria is the only one we know of who was actually lynched in the Coastside, however, it was reasonably common for groups of citizens to threaten lynching, usually against a person of color.

MURDER AND LYNCHING.—Thomas Marrion, a native of England, was most brutally murdered at Pescadero in this county. *Santa Cruz Sentinel, March 6, 1862*

named Ramon Larria.

The general opinion is that he was lynched.

Murder that no one cared about—June 1862

CUTTING AFFAIR IN SAN MATEO COUNTY.
—Officer Chapelle arrested on Kearny street, yesterday, a Spaniard, named Sanchez, for cutting nigh unto death, as is supposed, one José Rigardo, in Spanishtown, near Half Moon Bay, in San Mateo County.

Daily Alta California, July 17, 1862

On July 16, A man named Sanchez was arrested in San Francisco for the stabbing death of José Rigardo in Spanishtown about twenty days earlier. After stabbing Rigardo in the chest with a pen knife, Sanchez was reported to say "I don't know if he is dead or not, but I hope I have killed him." Sanchez said that he had stayed in Spanishtown until two days ago when he drove some cattle to San Francisco and that when he walked the

streets in Spanishtown, no one seemed to care about the murder.

Tiburcio Vasquez—April 15, 1863

For more information on this murder, see the article on the subject in this issue.

Self-defense—September 18, 1866

On Tuesday evening, September 18, John Jones, a farmer who lived outside of Spanishtown, sat down to supper with Henderson, a person in his employ. Henderson demanded money that he was owed and Jones said he would go in the morning to Spanishtown in order to be able to settle the account. Apparently, Henderson was not happy with the response and after an argument, Henderson grabbed a

HOMICIDE NEAR HALF MOON BAY.—
We learn that a man by the name of Henderson was shot and killed instantly, on Tuesday evening last, by John Jones, who resides on the coast near Spanish-

Figure 2 September 22, 1866

carving knife and went for Jones. Jones fled to another room and when Henderson followed him, Jones grabbed a revolver and shot Henderson, killing him.

Jones went to Spanishtown and surrendered himself to the constable there. After an investigation, it was determined to be self-defense and Jones was released.

Post-1860s

The killings continued into the 1870s. The first killing of a woman, Honora (Nora) Finnegan, happened in Denniston's Ranch (in what is now El Granada to Montara area) in 1872. Several non-white people were accused but no one was convicted. Also in 1872, a Swiss man from near Spanishtown named Joe Herling, also known as Mountain Joe, murdered a San Mateo store clerk for not giving him store credit.



Photo of chute at Pigeon Point with boat receiving goods by Eadweard Muybridge c1973 - Courtesy New York Public Library

In 1875 we had the Coastsides version of the 'shootout at OK Corral'. It was the 'shootout at Pigeon Point'. Loren Coburn owned most of the San Mateo County land south of Pescadero, including Pigeon Point. There was a chute at Pigeon Point where produce was slid into the hold of waiting ships. The chute was very lucrative so when the lease on the land it was on was up, Coburn wanted to take control of it. The shipping company that used it did not want to release control. They hired a gunslinger named Alexander Rea to guard the chute. Coburn put together a gang of "roughs" and waited for Rea to head to town to get provisions. When he did, Coburn and his men took control of the chute. When Rea returned, he told them to leave. They didn't and bullets started flying. Rea was quickly killed, but the

"roughs" took the opportunity to riddle his body with bullets. They were all arrested for murder but eventually released with no charge.

By the 1880s, things had started to quiet down on the Coastsides. There were fewer killings and it's probably not a coincidence that the number of killings dropped as the number of families increased. The Coastsides was becoming less a place where men went to make their mark and more a place to raise a family.

Tiburcio Vasquez—Exploring One of Half Moon Bay's Oldest Cold Cases

--Seneca Burdine, rising Senior at Half Moon Bay High School and volunteer at the Half Moon Bay History Association

On Wednesday the 15th of April, 1863, Tiburcio Vasquez, a prominent figure in the Half Moon Bay community, was shot dead in his chair through the window of a saloon on Main Street as he readied himself to play a game of cards. The shot rang out at 10:30 pm, and resulted in one of the most bizarre murders in the town's history. A deep dive into the Vasquez murder reveals the wildly different and numerous possible motives, and suspects, that led to his murder.

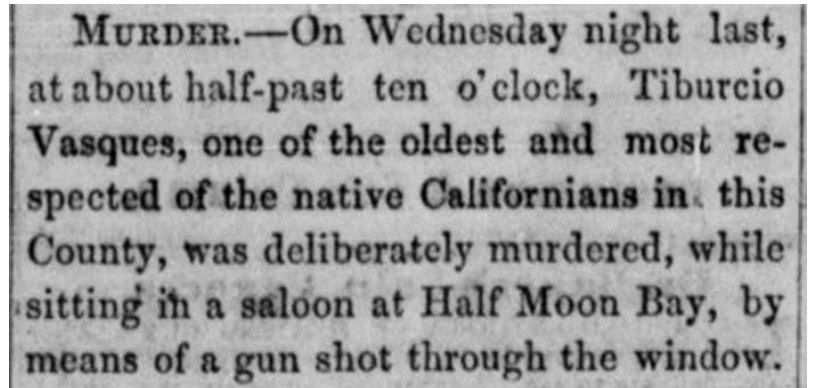
Tiburcio Vasquez

Born in Alta California in 1795, Vasquez would go on to serve as a soldier at the San Francisco Presidio from 1819-1825. He would later become majordomo/administrator of Mission Dolores Livestock, and receive a massive southern portion of a land grant totaling 4436 acres, known as the Corral de Tierra land grant. This land would become parts of what is present-day Miramar, Half Moon Bay, El Granada, and Pilarcitos Creek. By the 1840s, he had established himself as a prominent Californio ranchero, Californios being those of Spanish and Mexican descent who lived in California during the Spanish and Mexican periods. His life as a prominent ranchero would continue until his untimely death in a Half Moon Bay Saloon in 1863.

A Deadly Game of Cards

The first suspect one should look at when analyzing Vasquez's murder is the man he was sitting down to play cards with when he was killed. The unnamed man in question insisted Vasquez play a game of cards with him, and once Vasquez had agreed, the man conveniently positioned Vasquez to sit directly in front of the open saloon window with his back facing towards it. Such a thing could be deemed coincidental, until a witness revealed that the man challenging Vasquez to a game of cards had been

overheard only minutes earlier in a store down the street, telling 2 other men that Vasquez would "Be dead before dawn". Following the murder, the man was arrested almost immediately, but was released a week later without clear reason. His identity and that of the men he was conversing with unfortunately remain a mystery.



From the April 18, 1863 edition of the Times Gazette

The Santillan Land Fraud Case

Mexico's secularization of the missions in 1834 had put a massive strain on Mission Dolores. Combined with the pressure of urbanization and the expansion of neighborhoods, the mission which had once been a massive plot of land with thousands of livestock was reduced to little more than the church itself and the priests' quarters. The mission was in desperate need of land, and its needs seemed to be met in 1846 when Mexican Governor Pio Pico granted 3 square leagues of land (22,883 acres) to Father Prudencio Santillan, a priest at the mission. When the U.S. annexed California it agreed to honor the land grants of newly claimed land as long as the validity of the grants could be proved in court. However, federal attorneys argued that the grant, which contained extremely valuable land (Now part of present-day San Francisco), had been fabricated or forged. Tiburcio Vasquez was a key witness in the case that would help decide whether or not the grant was legitimate. He was a witness in the case alongside Francisco Guerrero, the owner of the larger northern portion of the Corral de Tierra land grant (7766 acres), who was murdered in 1850 before he could testify. Many believe both Vasquez and Guerrero's murders to be linked to the Santillan Land Fraud case, speculating that they were silenced so that the failing mission could receive the land grant it desperately needed. The mission hoped that the land would be transferred to them to clear old debts the mission had collected over the years. Unfortunately for the mission however, the grant was pronounced fraud and rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1860.

Additional Motivations

There are additional suspects and motives for Vasquez's murder, and while they may not be as fascinating or spectacular as a fraudulent land grant scheme, they are still plausible in their simplicity. Roughly a week after the Vasquez murder, a man named only as "Berondo" was arrested as a suspect. Although no reason was listed as to why, it was noted that the man was already on trial at the time for horse stealing. Given the circumstances, and the lack of information besides a common Filipino surname, it is possible that this person could have been an acquaintance of, or employee under Vasquez, and was promised livestock and/or land in return for murdering him.

Another plausible, if not more speculative motivation, involves Vasquez's nephew by the same name. This Tiburcio Vasquez was a notorious bandit who terrorized California from 1854 to his death in 1875. Sharing a name with one of the most wanted bandits in the state was almost guaranteed to cause confusion, and it's entirely possible that someone unaware of their shared name killed the wrong Tiburcio Vasquez, in an attempt to bring down the notorious bandit.

Moving Forward

It is not an exaggeration to say that solving this case feels nearly impossible. There are so many suspected motives and explanations, and not enough evidence to make concrete conclusions, however that doesn't mean people will stop trying. As science and technology evolve, as historians uncover more records, accounts and evidence, new things get revealed. With a lot of dedication, and an equal amount of luck and time, we can hope for a day when something new comes to the surface and helps shed light on one of the oldest and most baffling cold cases in Half Moon Bay's history.



Tiburcio Vasquez adobe following the 1906 earthquake

Shocking Murder—Babes in the Woods

— Ellen Chiri

On June 25, 1946 Gino Baldocci and James Fiedler, nurserymen at the Coastside Nursery in Wagner canyon, saw a woman staggering down a wagon road and bleeding from head wounds. They called Deputy Sheriff Fred Simmons, who took the woman to San Mateo Community Hospital.



Barbara Anne

A search of the area where the woman was found revealed the bodies of two little girls. The San Mateo Times reported that the children's bodies were discovered in a "tree-enclosed gully...east of Montara."

The little girls had been beaten to death. They were later identified as Barbara Anne, 23 months, and Carolyn Lee, five months, children of the dazed and stumbling Lorraine Newton of Alameda. The Oakland Tribune reported that at the hospital she was given "...a 50-50 chance of recovery. Dr. Harold Raycroft, superintendent of the hospital, said she had a five-inch skull fracture that started from a point directly over her nose and went over the top of her head."

When she was able, Mrs. Newton gave Deputy District Attorney Fred Wyckoff an account of the attack. The family had gone for a ride to Rockaway Beach in a car they borrowed from husband Vorhas Newton's sister. "We were riding along having a good time," she said. "The next thing I knew I woke up and was cold and wet, so I began walking. I could hardly walk and I wanted to get in touch with someone. I kept hollering and walking. Hollering and walking. Hollering and walking."

Vorhas Newton, a Navy veteran employed as a glazier, was nowhere to be found; police posted a bulletin bearing his photo at railroad and bus stations as

the search continued. He was located on the shores of Emerald Bay at Lake Tahoe, where motorists picked him up. They said that he was in a daze, his body cut and bruised, his clothing soaked with blood and water, and he was barefoot. The motorists took him to a doctor, where a nurse recognized him from the police bulletin and called the local constable.

The San Mateo Times noted that Newton was "... bleeding copiously as the result of what authorities called an attempted suicide by a dive from the lake shore rocks... Half maudlin from shock and exposure, the man gasped out a weird story of a 'mental blackout'...."

When Auburn police took Newton into custody he said that he had no memory of what had happened at Montara. He had apparently returned home to Alameda after the car ride, changed his clothes, and returned the borrowed car to his sister. He said that he had taken a bus to Salt Lake City, awakened on a park bench in Reno, then hitchhiked to Lake Tahoe.

Newton was arraigned on July 8, 1946 in Half Moon Bay. The press dubbed the case "Babes in the Woods" and it had become notorious. The hearing attracted so many spectators that Judge Manuel Bettencourt "...moved the court from his regular quarters to the



Vorhas Newton in custody

gymnasium of the Half Moon Bay High School” the Oakland Tribune reported. “There he arraigned Newton, sitting under the basketball backboards.”

Witnesses declared that they considered the Newtons’ marriage a happy one, and that he was a devoted husband who loved his wife and children. Attorney Leo Friedman indicated that Newton was to plead innocent of the murders by reason of insanity.

The trial was underway when sudden news shocked and silenced the courtroom. Vorhes Newton had hanged himself in jail.

The Oakland Tribune of October 15 reported that he “...committed suicide early today by hanging himself with an electric light cord in the shower room of the San Mateo County Jail.”

After an investigation a grand jury cleared the San Mateo County sheriff’s office of blame in Newton’s death. According to the Salinas Californian, the jury reported “You can’t sit in their cells and hold their hands.”

September Program! Wonderful Wavcrest—From Exploitation to Preservation



Photo Courtesy Barbara Dye

**Wednesday September 16, 6:00 PM.
Half Moon Bay Library 620 Correas St,
Half Moon Bay. Doors open at 5:30 PM**

Barbara Dye will cover 100 million fascinating years of the history of the coastal bluffs of the Wavcrest area. She'll talk about the geology, people, projects, and habitat that make the Wavcrest area so special. Barbara will also cover the twists and turns of local land use, and the impacts of changes on the land.

A volunteer with Coastside Land Trust, Barbara lives in El Granada with her husband John and their dog Brody. She is a docent at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, and Board President of the Granada Community Services District.

President's Message

—Bill Scholtz, President

One of the most rewarding parts of preserving Coastsides history is being able to bring our stories to life through new exhibits and displays. Over the past few months, we've been working on two new displays at the Coastsides History Museum that tell very different, but equally important, stories from our community's past.

First, we have updated our display featuring the Cunha Store doors, which were rescued from the devastating 2003 fire that destroyed the historic store. The doors are a tangible connection to one of Half Moon Bay's longtime landmarks. The new display provides more of the story behind Cunha's Store, its importance to the community, and the fire that brought an end to the historic building. We hope the display helps visitors understand not only what was lost, but also why preserving the surviving pieces of our past matters.

Our second new exhibit tells the story of the Japanese Americans from the Coastsides who were forcibly removed from their homes during World War II and incarcerated. The exhibit focuses particularly on the two places where many local residents were sent: the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, where families were initially held at the former racetrack, and the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah, where many were subsequently incarcerated.

These stories are an important part of Coastsides history. They remind us that history is not simply about buildings, dates, and events—it is about the people who lived here, built their lives here, and experienced both the good and difficult chapters of our community's past.

We invite you to visit the museum and see these new displays for yourself. And, as always, we welcome your stories, photographs, documents, and memories. Each one can help us add another piece to the remarkable story of the Coastsides.

Volunteer Opportunities—Join Us!

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

- Volunteer at the Coastsides History Museum and historic jail to share our stories with visitors from near and far
- Research and write articles for *Coastsides Chronicles*, our quarterly publication
- Research and archive photos and other memorabilia for our collection of artifacts
- Join the Education committee to share the Coastsides'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

What ship is this and how did it end up on the beach in Half Moon Bay.

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.



Last Issue's Coastside Time Traveler

This is the Seaside Schoolhouse in San Gregorio. The school district was created in 1871 and the building was built around that period. It was open until around 1954 which means the school district lasted around 83 years. The building is in private hands and this is a recent photo.

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.

