

A rare photo of Henry and his wife Harriet as they stand outside their barn on the Cowell Ranch (see page 62).

## HENRY COWELL: The Enigmatic Figure of Santa Cruz History

By Geoffrey Dunn

**H**is name is so ubiquitous in the region that people hear it without even thinking about the real-life man who carved such a wide swath in Santa Cruz County history. There is a state park named in his honor, a college at UCSC, a beach, a popular surf shop, a street, a gulch, a mountain, and a hiking trail. The first wharf on the Santa Cruz waterfront and a long forgotten local baseball team also took his name. A health center at the university and a foundation are named for his sons.

It can be safely argued that his legacy is so grand that it continues to shape the political, economic and cultural life of this community more than a century after his death: the University of California campus sits on land in which he first invested in the 1850s and which he and his partners turned into a prosperous lime kiln operation that eventually extended throughout the West. The First Congregational Church and Westlake Elementary School are also located on former Cowell lands.

Santa Cruz would be a very different place were it not for Henry Cowell—but today, the details of his life are largely forgotten and his biography a vague shadow on the historical horizon of the community.

There is a reason for this. Henry Cowell was something of a social recluse with a

mixed reputation in the community. He was a big man (6'2" and 240 pounds) with even bigger ambitions. He was by various accounts extremely competitive, aggressive and combative—and apparently a domineering father to his children. He was often embroiled in lawsuits; one, with the California Powder Works, lasted more than two decades.

He despised publicity and, with rare exception, refused to have photos taken of him or his children. Images of the Cowell family are exceptionally rare. He fiercely protected his privacy and abhorred public scrutiny.

In spite of all the institutions that pay homage to his memory, the simple fact of the matter is that Henry Cowell was not a beloved figure in Santa Cruz. In 1878, after he relentlessly tried to purchase the entire Santa Cruz waterfront—from West Cliff Drive all the way to the San Lorenzo river mouth—the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* unabashedly declared: "Henry Cowell is the worst enemy Santa Cruz ever had."

By 1880 he had abandoned his home and ranch in Santa Cruz for the more urban confines of his family's mansion in San Francisco. When he died in 1903—less than six months after being shot in the shoulder by an angry farmer—Cowell's legacy here was far from golden.

**B**orn in Wrentham, Massachusetts, in June of 1819, Henry Cowell knocked around the antebellum South as a contractor before he and his brother John, like many other New Englanders, were lured to California by the Gold Rush in 1849. The brothers realized that California's booming economy provided opportunities beyond the goldfields, and they soon established a successful mercantile business in San Francisco and later a drayage operation with routes from the port cities of Stockton and Sacramento into the Sierra foothills.

The brothers eventually divided their business interests—with John later alleging that Henry had significantly short-changed him in the purchase price. It was a rift that never healed.

Henry began accumulating vast tracts of land throughout the west. He also started a family. Returning to Massachusetts during the mid-1850s, he married Harriet Carpenter, a native of Ireland, and over the course of the next decade, Harriet would give birth to six children—Roland (who died in infancy), Isabella, Ernest, Samuel Henry ("Harry"), Sarah and Helen.

The post-Gold Rush boom in California spawned a growth spurt throughout the state, and construction materials—most notably lime, used for the production of brick mortar,



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plaster, stucco, cement and whitewash—were in short supply and had to be shipped around the horn of South America. In Santa Cruz, a pair of entrepreneurs named Albion Jordan and Isaac Davis developed a successful lime operation in the foothills above Bay Street and began shipping their product to San Francisco. The lime coming out of Santa Cruz was described by the *San Francisco Times* as “equal to the best in the world.”

Henry Cowell first bought into the Davis and Jordan operation in 1857, eventually purchasing Jordan’s share at the end of the Civil War. Davis & Cowell were soon shipping out more than 1,000 barrels of lime a week. When Davis died in 1888, Cowell consolidated the business and built up an empire, the economic center of which was eventually relocated to San Francisco. He had holdings in 23 California counties and operated four kilns in Santa Cruz County. He eventually expanded his lucrative enterprise to include cattle ranching, dairy and vegetable farming, timber harvesting, storage and shipping. He owned prime properties in San Francisco, while his vast landholdings extended all the way from San Luis Obispo to the San Juan Islands.



Around the turn of the 19th century Santa Cruz had many local baseball teams including the Henry Cowell’s Limeburners.

While Cowell’s business activities were centered in San Francisco, he raised his family on his ranch in Santa Cruz, beginning in 1865. He built a beautiful home overlooking Monterey Bay, while his children attended Bay View School (located then, as now, at the corner of Bay and Mission streets.) His daughters, according to Santa Cruz newspaper legend Ernest Otto, were superb students, while his sons were hard-working and fine athletes. Ernest became a star in football, baseball and track at UC Berkeley, while Harry was an acknowledged leader of Santa Cruz’s crack fire team, the Alerts.

By the early 1890s, Cowell’s accumulated wealth was among the greatest in Santa Cruz County—but his legal troubles were never far behind. He charged his former partner posthumously with embezzlement and named his heirs in a civil suit. He was

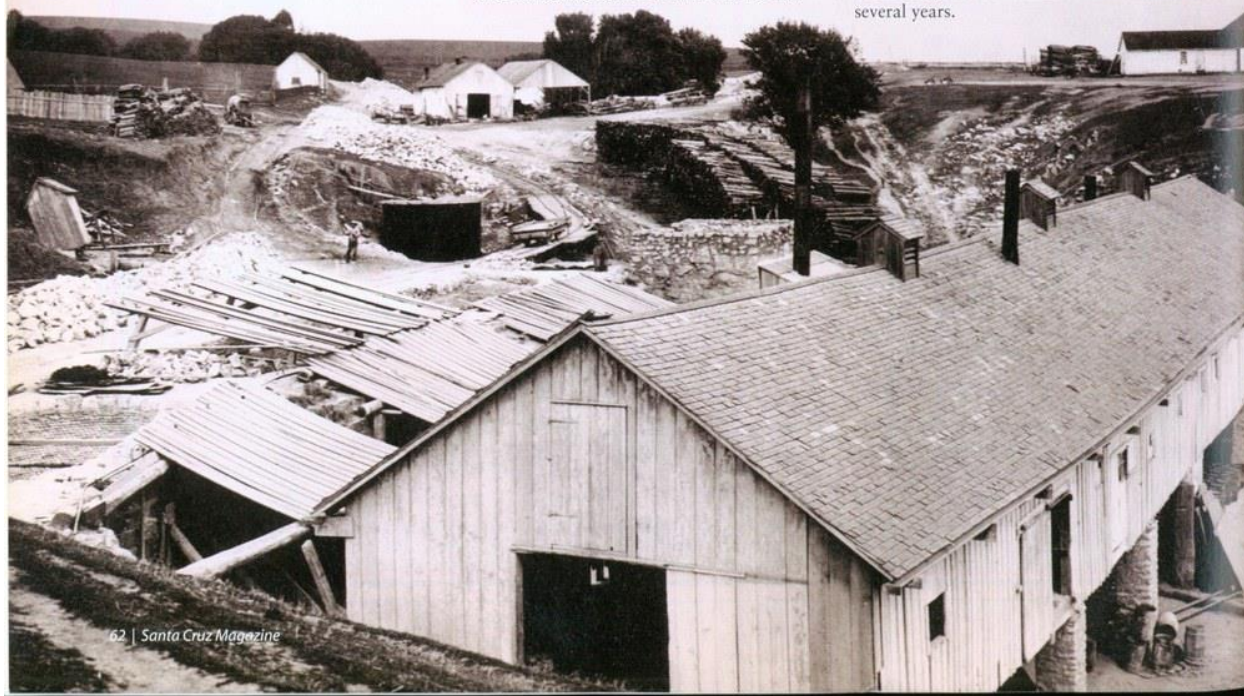
accused of conspiring to set the price of lime with his competitors. He tried to block the building of roads to maintain an advantage over other lime companies and was even charged with blocking the U.S. mail.

Perhaps most significantly, he was accused of exploiting his workers and forcing them to work under unsafe conditions. Two were killed and several crippled

in his lime operations, leaving the *Santa Cruz Weekly Courier* to proclaim, “When carelessness involves human life it cannot fail to be criminal, and we hope the next Grand Jury will investigate.”

On the other hand, he and his family could be generous in times of need. In 1867 he contributed to a school run by the Sisters of Charity. In 1879, he paid teachers’ salaries when the county government lacked sufficient funds to cover their contracts. He also contributed to local churches and other institutions of mercy.

Relocated to San Francisco in 1879, Cowell remained wildly successful but could not escape controversy. The *San Francisco Call* carried headlines dubbing him the “Reputed Master of Lime Trade,” but there was yet another scandal involving the family that would keep the Cowell name in headlines for several years.





In 1893, a widowed woman from Santa Cruz, Maria Antonia Castro Majors—the descendant of an original Branciforte family and whose husband had been recently killed in a barroom shooting—claimed that she had given birth to the illegitimate son of Harry Cowell. She filed suit in San Francisco court to prove her case.

While garnering sensational headlines in San Francisco papers, the scandal was tempered somewhat in Santa Cruz out of deference to Cowell's wealth and power. According to Majors, Harry Cowell had promised to marry her. Many suspected that an irate Henry—who was rumored to forbid his children from marrying—had prevented the union from taking place. He reportedly had disowned his son Ernest at the time of his marriage.

For all his fortune, a series of tragedies came knocking at Henry Cowell's door in 1903. That winter, an irate farmer in Merced, Leigh Ingalsbe, claimed that some of Cowell's cattle destroyed his family's corn crop and demanded payment of \$500. Cowell refused to pay. When Cowell visited his Merced landholdings in March of that year, he was shot through the shoulder by Ingalsbe. Cowell, then 84, survived and returned to his home in San Francisco, apparently on the mend.

Two months later, however, Cowell's daughter Sarah, having just returned from a tour of Europe, went on a carriage excursion with a friend on the family's Santa Cruz ranch above the upper kilns. The horses



**Henry Cowell**

bolted, and she was thrown from the carriage and killed. Her two unmarried sisters, Helen and Isabella, were so distraught by the accident that they refused to ever set foot on the Cowell property again.

The death of his daughter was a huge emotional setback for the recovering Cowell. Meanwhile, his assailant Ingalsbe was acquitted on charges of attempted murder by reason of insanity. Cowell's health faltered and

he died on August 4, 1903, in San Francisco. "[Henry Cowell] had a powerful physical frame, a vigorous intellect and an indomitable will," *The Santa Cruz Surf* declared in its obituary. "He willed to be a rich man—and he succeeded...Such men cannot be kept down."

Ernest took over his family's enterprise, followed by Harry until his death in 1955, when the family's wealth was turned into the S.H. Cowell Foundation. There were no remaining heirs. Just before he died, Harry had gifted to the state a large stand of redwoods along the San Lorenzo River, just below Felton, that would eventually become Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, in memory of his father. He also deeded the family's beach holdings, just west of the Municipal Wharf, to the City of Santa Cruz.

The remaining children helped to fund a home for the blind in San Francisco. Isabella founded a children's hospital in Sacramento in honor of her sister, Helen. Ernest founded a scholarship in Santa Cruz County for local students to attend the University of California, and gave money to the university for a health center, a stadium and a gym on the Berkeley campus. Today, the S.H. Cowell Foundation works to improve the lives of children living in poverty in Northern and Central California.



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Additional readings: *Lime Kiln Legacies*, by Frank Perry, et al, published by the Museum of Art and History (2007); *Henry Cowell and His Family (1819-1955): A Brief History*, by Laurie MacDougall, published by the H.S. Cowell Foundation (1989).

Geoffrey Dunn is the author of *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart*.

(Above) A view of the Cowell Ranch and Lime Company which was home of Henry Cowell's enterprises beginning in the 1870s. In 1961 the State of California purchased 2000 acres of the ranch at a low price for the creation of the University of California.

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