



Earliest Britton & Rey lithograph of California Powder Works, circa 1870.

# WHEN SANTA CRUZ WAS “BOOM” TOWN

The California Powder Works Was a Lively—  
and Sometimes Deadly—Place to Be Employed

By Geoffrey Dunn

Santa Cruz made headlines in the *New York Times* during the week of April 26, 1898, and the news was literally explosive.

“Powder Mills Blown Up,” the headline declared. “At Least Six Men Killed and Four Injured by an Explosion near Santa Cruz...”

Located little more than two miles from the coast on Highway 9 along the San Lorenzo River (at the present site of Paradise Park), the California Powder Works (CPW) was then the second-largest gunpowder plant in the United States. It was also the largest industrial employer in Santa Cruz County.

At 5:15 p.m. on that fateful April afternoon, during the height of the Spanish-American War, a smokeless powder mill exploded, igniting several fires and even more explosions at various locations throughout the facility. The blasts could be felt all the way to Salinas and could be heard across the bay in Monterey.

In the end, at least a dozen workers were killed and several more injured in what was the biggest explosion in the Powder Works’ long history. At first, “an emissary of Spain or a zealous Spaniard” was suspected of setting off the explosion, but that proved to be nothing more than rumor. Powder Works officials conceded that it had been yet another accident.



## Born of the Civil War

Many have assumed that the California Powder Works was built to provide gunpowder to the Union Army during the Civil War, but that is simply not the case. As historian Barry Brown, who is working on a book about the Powder Works, points out, the story is a bit more complex.

Because of the Confederate blockade during the Civil War, shipments of black powder to the Pacific Coast ground to a near halt. The federal government did not want the powder getting into the hands of the Confederacy. As a result, the building of railroad lines, other major construction projects requiring blasting powder and placer mining activities throughout the West were threatened.

Such was the impetus for the California Powder Works to purchase land just above the site of the San Lorenzo Paper Mill in late December of 1861. It wasn't until May of 1864 that powder was actually produced. During its first full year of operation, in 1865, an output of 150,000 powder kegs, 25 pounds each, was recorded — but not a bit of it was used by the Union Army.

Another myth about the Powder Works was that it was built in Santa Cruz because of the proximity to limestone deposits in the region. That was also not the case. In fact, black powder was produced by grinding the charcoal of willow, alder and madrone trees (which were plentiful in the region) with sulfur and nitrate of potash (which were not). The CPW bought a wharf owned by David Gharkey on the Santa Cruz waterfront for importing the necessary ingredients and exporting the completed gunpowder.

What was historically significant about the CPW is that it served as the site of the first Chinese community in Santa Cruz County. About a dozen Chinese workers were employed there once production began in 1864, and as many as three dozen by the early 1870s — though they were never welcomed by white Santa Cruz.

As Sandy Lydon has noted in "Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region," the first anti-Chinese attack in the region took place against Powder Works employees in October of 1864 when a band of masked and armed vigilantes tied up the CPW night watchman and herded the Chinese workers into town.

## End of boom times

The CPW eventually grew to include more than 20 separate milling sites, three shops, six storage facilities for ammunition, and 35 other buildings, employing a peak of 275 workers. It remained one of the largest regional employers throughout the 19th Century and into the 20th.

All sorts of precautions were taken to prevent further industrial explosions or limit their damage. Workers had to wear specially tailored clothes and shoes that had no metal on them. Buildings were designed to give way into the hillside, and eucalyptus groves were eventually planted to block flying debris from the blasts.

But the explosions continued. More workers were killed or maimed. And the blasts were becoming too much for the burgeoning community of Santa Cruz to take.

Moreover, by 1914, black powder was being rapidly replaced by other explosives, including

TNT and nitroglycerine, and the Santa Cruz base of the Powder Works was relocated to Hercules, California, in Contra Costa County. The terrifying explosions finally came to an end.

Today, the California Powder Works is the home of the Paradise Park Masonic Club, with 391 residences in its quiet sylvan setting straddling the San Lorenzo River.

*Geoffrey Dunn is the author of 'Santa Cruz Is in the Heart.' Anyone with further information about the California Powder Works should e-mail Barry Brown at [transom-b@sbcglobal.net](mailto:transom-b@sbcglobal.net).*



Workers at the California Powder Works, circa the 1898 explosion. The Chinese workforce lived in separate quarters and ate at separate cookhouses.

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