

San Lorenzo Once was Full of Fish: The River was Santa Cruz's No. 2 Tourist Draw

By Ross Eric Gibson

Before flood-control measures were taken by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1959, the San Lorenzo River was Santa Cruz's No. 2 tourist attraction and one of Northern California's most popular fishing spots.

No wagon bridge spanned the river until 1868, and the downtown was laid out between two fords. The lower ford was called the Kingsford, because Soquel Avenue was once El Camino Real, or the King's Road. The upper ford, which was deeper, was called the Waterford. Even after construction of the 1868 Water Street bridge and 1874 Soquel Avenue covered bridge, fords for watering horses continued to parallel them.

The riverbanks were mostly forest groves of willows, water maples, alders, laurels, elms, live oaks, cedars, and redwoods. Downtown was the hortaliza, or vegetable garden, for the mission, and north of Mission Hill was the orchard.

Front Street was originally Main Street, and the backs of businesses extended over the river on stilts. As the downtown outgrew this two-block street, the town hoped to extend the street south of Soquel Avenue and link it with Liebrandt Avenue. For flood control, the street would have run atop a dike, but orchardists saw their irrigation water threatened and blocked this plan.

The business district shifted to Pacific Avenue instead. After an 1862 flood, Bulkhead Street was constructed atop a low dike.

The state declared the San Lorenzo River 150 feet wide in 1872 to prevent encroachment. Local laws curbed mill dumping of sawdust, which suffocated fish, in the river. Bausch beer gardens lost business on the days a nearby winery dumped pungent tailings in the creek. And the river ran red when Kron's tannery emptied a tanbark vat.

As businesses abandoned Front Street, it became Chinatown. But the Chinese inherited an area where raw sewage went right into the river. A stench filled the downtown at low tide, and the Chinese were blamed during an 1870s anti-Chinese movement.

The controversy ended when a laundry fire burned Chinatown in 1894, taking half of downtown with it. Chinatown was relocated to the nearby Blackburn Farm, and to Midford Island, which stood between the two fords and is today the Longs/Zanato's parking lot. [Editor's note: The drugstore here called Longs was renamed to CVS Pharmacy following a change of ownership in 2008.]

A large maple forest on the north was called Island Grove. It was a popular site for picnics and bull's-head barbecues. The latter were held by the island residents, wagon ornamenters Charles Alarcon and Lino Ortiz, who came from Mexico and built two adobes here.

When the railroad reached Santa Cruz in 1876, it was the river as much as the beach that drew tourists. Santa Cruz promoted itself as a "sportsmen's paradise," with most hotels only two blocks from the river. Hotels and downtown campgrounds saw a business boom each year at the start of fishing season.

With the river mouth dammed part of the year, more than a dozen docks lined it, many renting rowboats. When boardwalk founder Fred Swanton helped build a fish hatchery at Brookdale in 1905, the San Lorenzo became the No. 1 fishing river in Northern California, and remained so for half a century.

The river also offered a dozen swimming holes. Historian Ernest Otto, who grew up in the 1870s, recalled that children from certain neighborhoods frequented certain holes. Store-bought bathing suits were the exception back then. Girls wore an old calico summer dress, and boys either wore a union suit or a cut-off flour sack, with cutout leg holes, and drawstring belt.

The river mouth was the favorite spot, with its bathhouse and diving raft. Local boys favored Rennie Slough, which stretched from Cathcart Street to Beach Hill, almost reaching Pacific Avenue. The slough was warm and deep, and so sheltered by groves of trees that nude swimming was the norm, as it was at swim holes above the Water Street Bridge.

Rennie's Slough was finally filled in and became the town fairgrounds. When the annual Venetian Water Carnivals, which featured decorated boat parades, began in 1895, the former slough was called Waterfair Square and the lower river "Laguna Carnivale." The carnival staged Gilbert & Sullivan operas on an island at the river bend called the Opera Island.

During the 1920s and '30s, Fred Swanton encouraged river beautification and helped establish Community Park, where the Court House is today. But after the 1955 flood, all riverside forests were stripped, and the river was straightened by the Army Corps of Engineers. Town fathers felt tourism was the wrong image for Santa Cruz, and the aesthetics of the river were never restored. A look at that work in 1974 said the river had been reduced to a "drainage ditch."

Sources

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