

Photo illustration: WWD

Life at the Water's Edge

Following the course of water in Santa Cruz

By Stacey Vreeken

The story of water in Santa Cruz is like the San Lorenzo River running through the heart of the city: It flows, bends, floods and ultimately nurtures our community. For thousands of years, the Ohlone followed the San Lorenzo's rhythms, catching fish from river and sea, gathering shellfish from tide pools, harvesting acorns from abundant oaks and grounding them on river-scoured bedrock.

"Santa Cruz from its beginning has been blessed with water. Explorers, priests, soldiers, pioneers all thought so," said retired UC Santa Cruz professor Dr. Melanie Mayer. "For all intents and purposes, we are still blessed. Not too many places can depend on water and getting it cheaply." Mayer, who has a keen interest in local history, gives tours for the city of Santa Cruz and speaks at various Santa Cruz events on our water's story. Historical accounts of the time describe abundant streams and springs throughout the West-

lake area with flocks of migratory waterfowl and herds of tule elk amid a marshy Neary Lagoon.

When Mission Santa Cruz was established in 1791, a large Ohlone settlement occupied Beach Hill, possibly dating back 2,000 years, according to history writer MaryEllen Ryan in an article for the Santa Cruz Historic Preservation Commission. The mission was set up and back from the mercurial flow of the San Lorenzo, obtaining its water from a ditch dug at natural springs near what is now the entrance to the UCSC campus, according to the water department. Imagine High Street as a small aqueduct bordered by a path leading to the Mission.

Describing the river in a San Jose Mercury News article entitled, "San Lorenzo Once Was Full of Fish," historian Ross Eric Gibson wrote: "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."

Within 50 years, the population of Santa Cruz expanded beyond what the shallow wells, springs, and river draws could supply. By the time of the city's incorporation in 1866, E.M. Morgan scooped up the water rights from the San Lorenzo and installed pipe work in a franchise for the city, according to the water department's history archive. And though this wasn't "Chinatown," the Jack Nicholson noir film about Los Angeles water rights, franchises were sold and reservoirs for storing water were built. The one at School and High

(Above) The Padres of the California Missions were some of first to develop water sources. The gravity-fed fountains of the Mission gardens were a welcome site in the 1700s.

Photo: Santa Cruz Public Libraries



(Above) The scenic banks of the San Lorenzo River prior to the building of the levees after the 1955 flood. The city of Santa Cruz can be seen in the background.

streets was built by pioneer M.O. Boyle, a stonemason who came west for gold and settled in Santa Cruz.

By the 1880s, water sources expanded to include Branciforte and Majors creeks in addition to the San Lorenzo River.

"But many Santa Cruz citizens didn't want the water system to be a privately owned monopoly. In this, there was a big debate over what should be run by capitalists for profit and what essential businesses should be run by government," said Mayer. The retired professor is currently writing a two-volume book on Santa Cruz's water history entitled, "Rising Up as Life: Stories of Santa Cruz California's Water Systems." When the city tried to issue bonds to purchase the privately held Santa Cruz Water Company, a lawsuit derailed the bond sale, and, with the company deeply in debt, noted Santa Cruz developer E.A. Hihn bought its holdings, according to the water department's history.

Maybe it was a bit like "Chinatown" after all.

"While Hihn felt he was helping the city, most Santa Cruz citizens wanted their water to be controlled by the municipality, not a monopoly," Mayer said. "It took

decades of suits and negotiations to settle the question, but in the meantime the city just built its own system in 1890."

That system included establishing a reservoir on Cowell's Ranch (UCSC), with Laguna and Liddell creeks feeding into it.

"The city's system supplied water to

the whole town. It was all distributed by gravity," Mayer explained. "The water ran downhill to reservoirs, then to all the places it needed to go. And it was pure enough that it wasn't treated (back then). To have a water system so you don't have to put power into it — it just runs downhill — that's a real accomplishment."

Hihn, one of the biggest property owners in the county, expanded his water company to the

Seabright area. In 1916, the city bought him out and consolidated the water supply, according to the water department. The city continued to sell bonds and expanded the water system throughout the 1900s.

Meanwhile, the San Lorenzo River



(Above) The Cowell Reservoir located on Cowell Ranch was built in 1890 to supply water for the city of Santa Cruz. The sign over the gate reads; "Santa Cruz City Water Works. Risdon Iron Works Builders, San Francisco 1890."

Photo: © Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History



Photo: Santa Cruz Water Department

(Above) Santa Cruz's Bay Street Reservoir during its construction in 1924.



(Above) In 1960 crews began the construction of the Newell Creek Dam in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The body of water that formed behind the 195 feet high earthen dam was originally named the Newell Reservoir but then later changed to Loch Lomond.

continued its cycle, regularly spreading through its floodplain where the city had expanded. Even the old Santa Cruz church was known as the “hard luck” mission when rains and floods hit from 1796 to 1799, according to Daniel McMahon’s “History of Floods in the San Lorenzo River in the City of Santa Cruz.”

Notable among the rains was the flood of 1862, which McMahon describes as “a shock to residents, as bridges and mills upstream were destroyed, buildings built on the banks of the river within the city were washed out to sea (one barn allegedly went to sea in an upright position), and water ran against the base of Mission Hill and eroded 30 feet of it away.”

It wasn’t until after the 1955 “Christmas flood” that the Army Corps of Engineers tried to tame the river, straightening and clearing its banks of vegetation. The Christmas flood flowed three to four feet deep down Pacific Avenue and nearly eight feet along Front Street, according to McMahon. Only the water flow from the 1982 storms came close.

The next big expansion to the water supply came in the early 1960s, when Newell Creek Dam, Loch Lomond Reservoir, and the Graham Hill Water Treatment Plant were constructed through the sale of \$5.5 million in bonds. Newell Creek, a tributary to the San Lorenzo River, was dammed with an earthfill barricade 190 feet high and 750 feet long. Completed in the fall of 1960, impounded

Photo: Santa Cruz Water Department

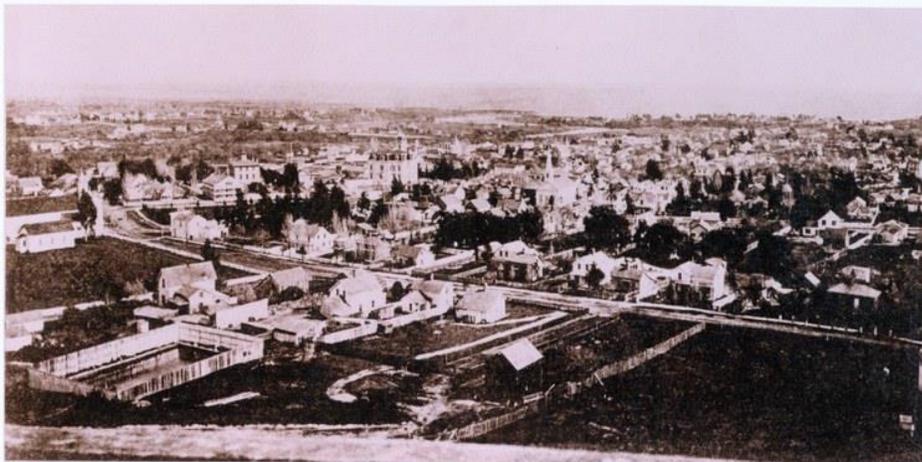


Photo: 1888 Library of Congress

(Above) M. O. Boyle was an early Santa Cruz pioneer and owned Logan Hill or Logan Heights, which overlooked the city of Santa Cruz. In 1875 he erected the first cement reservoir there (lower left).

water first ran over the spillway in early spring of 1963. With the dam, runoff from the eight-square-mile Newell Creek watershed was captured in a reservoir that could hold 2.8 billion gallons of water.



Photo: Mickey Carroll

(Above) Historian Dr. Melanie Mayer during a recent history event at UCSC.

An additional \$1.3 million in bonds was sold in 1963 to improve the system and acquire the watershed and land for an additional Zayante Dam and Reservoir. But the dam was never built. Environmental concerns, backed by the university, rallied opposition and the plan was abandoned. Instead, the city purchased surrounding private water utilities, such as Beltz Water Company, in 1967. That acquisition expanded the city's service and revenue, and provided additional sources of water, according to

Photo: Santa Cruz Public Libraries

the water department.

In 1976, The Felton Diversion Station was built to capture overflow from the San Lorenzo River during high-flow times and store it in Loch Lomond. While the flood of 1955 drowned the city, the drought of 1976-1977 raised the awareness of water conservation and the need for regional planning. It was the worst drought in the city's recorded history, leaving the supply with about 38 percent less water than expected, according to the city's Water Supply Advisory Committee. To this day, the committee is tackling how to meet the city's future water needs (water facts, proposals, and a timeline on the city's water history are on the committee's website, santa-cruzwatersupply.com). The North Santa Cruz County Water Master Plan was established in 1985 to take a regional view and suggest ways to augment water supply including wells, off-stream diversion, and more. With the impact of the current multiple-year drought, the Santa

Cruz Water Advisory Committee is weighing proposals for conserving and augmenting the water supply, including a proposed desalination plant.

"There's value in trying to see if we can get the water we need in a way that has the least amount of cost to ourselves and to the environment," said Mayer. "There are a lot of amazing things about how our water system was built and how it has worked over the decades. Knowing about it gives people an appreciation of what we use every day."



(Above) In 1930, Mayor Fred Swanton, with city officials, engineers, and workers pose near a 20-inch water pipe which would connect with the Santa Cruz city reservoir.