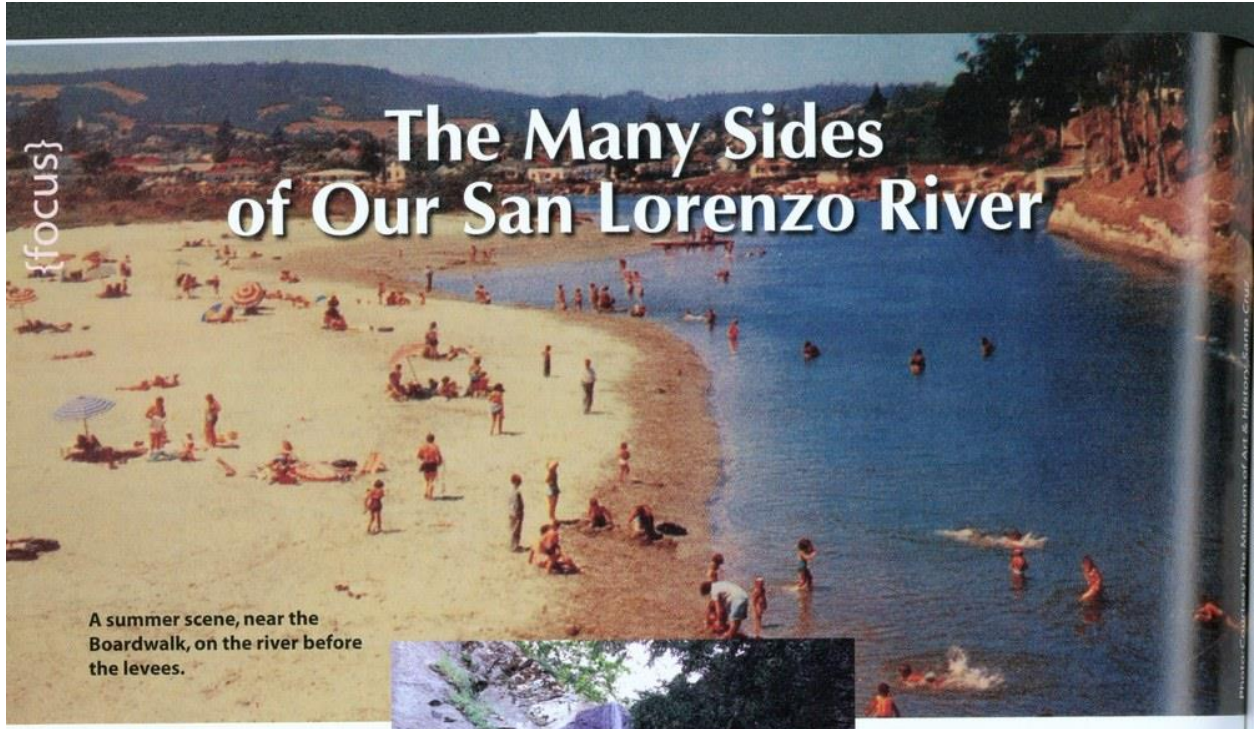


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The Many Sides of Our San Lorenzo River



A summer scene, near the Boardwalk, on the river before the levees.

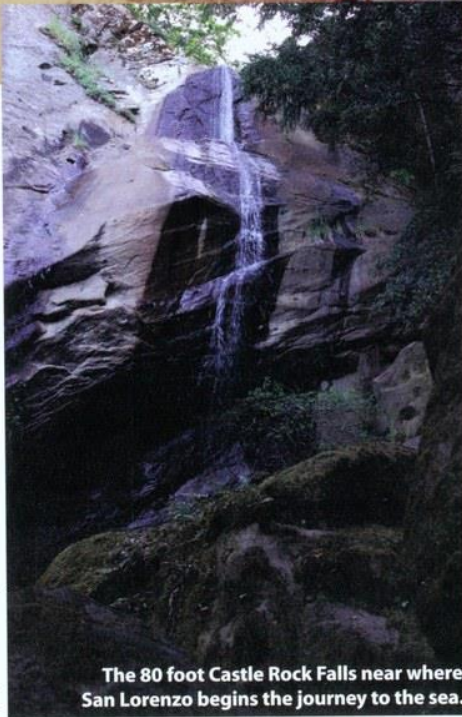
Over the past two centuries, the San Lorenzo River has been dammed and diverted, dredged and bridged, pumped and channeled, cursed and blessed. Today it's a great spot to explore on a day trip or staycation.

For most of the year, the San Lorenzo River meanders peacefully through the heart of Santa Cruz County. From its headwaters at Castle Rock, the river flows down past Boulder Creek, Brookdale, Ben Lomond, Felton, Paradise Park, and finally through Santa Cruz, where it spills into Monterey Bay. Children play on its gravelly beaches, tiny fishes huddle in its shallow pools, and bathers splash in its swimming holes.

But during heavy winter rains, the river shows a less friendly face. It transforms into a raging torrent of muddy water and floating logs, spilling over its banks as it makes a mad

dash for the bay.

Historically, the San Lorenzo has meant different things to different people. For the Ohlone Indians, it was a supermarket. They hunted deer and waterfowl along its banks and marshes, collected plants to use as medicine, harvested tules to build houses, and



The 80 foot Castle Rock Falls near where San Lorenzo begins the journey to the sea.

By Frank Perry

fished for salmon and trout.

With the arrival of Europeans, the river was put to the service of industry. Several locations on the river and its tributaries were dammed, and the water was diverted to waterwheels which powered machinery at various mills and factories. Water from its tributaries also flowed through the several local tanneries where it filled vats and was mixed with the chemicals for processing hides into leather. From 1875 to 1885, during the heyday of the local logging industry, part of the San Lorenzo was diverted into a gigantic flume that ran between Boulder Creek and Felton. Think "Logger's Revenge" at the Boardwalk, but made of wood and 14 miles long. Lumber cut in Boulder Creek was floated one board at a time down to Felton where it was loaded onto the railroad.

Today, many people rely on the river as a domestic water source. Some 135,000 residents from Santa Cruz to north of Boulder Creek depend on water pumped from the river and its tributaries.

Boulder Creek: A Town With a Past

One of the best and most easily accessible locations to see the entire San Lorenzo Valley is from the overlook beside Highway 9 about 12 miles above Boulder Creek (4.2 miles

Photo Courtesy: The Museum of Art & History, Santa Cruz



Almost every building in Boulder Creek is a historic building, says Lisa Robinson.

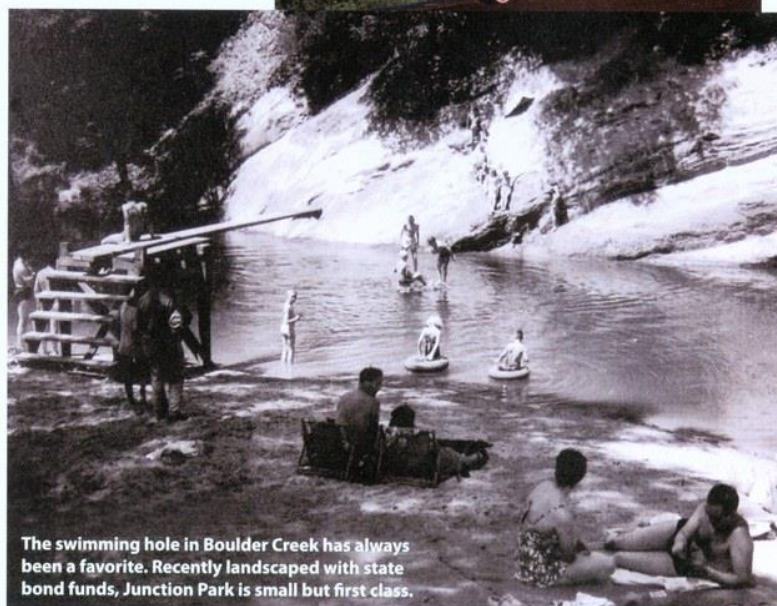
from the northern intersection of Highways 9 and 236). On a clear day, the view is simply spectacular. On the right, flat-topped Ben Lomond Mountain rises steeply from the valley floor. Even further to the right lies Eagle Rock. Below, ragged, tree-covered ridges fade from dark green to gray-blue as they dissolve into the distance. On a really clear day, you can see the Santa Lucia Range on the other side of Monterey Bay, 60 miles away.

A century ago the scene wasn't nearly so beautiful. Almost everything in sight had been logged. Photographs of the road to Big Basin, for example, show hillsides with only an occasional redwood, usually a misshapen specimen rejected by loggers.

Today the town of Boulder Creek harbors many reminders of the valley's industrial past, highlighted in the free walking-tour brochure available at the San Lorenzo Valley Museum (at the south end of town in a former church). The museum showcases many artifacts, including old logging equipment and vintage photographs. Through April, the museum features a special exhibit on an unlikely topic for the mountain town: surfing. Back in the 1880s, three Hawaiian princes were staying in Santa Cruz. They decided to partake of their native sport and catch some Santa Cruz waves, but there were no surfboards or surf shops back then. Most mainlanders had never heard of the sport. So the Hawaiians had some surfboards custom-made out of redwood from a mill at Brookdale — thus the Valley connection. A modern redwood surfboard is included in the exhibit.

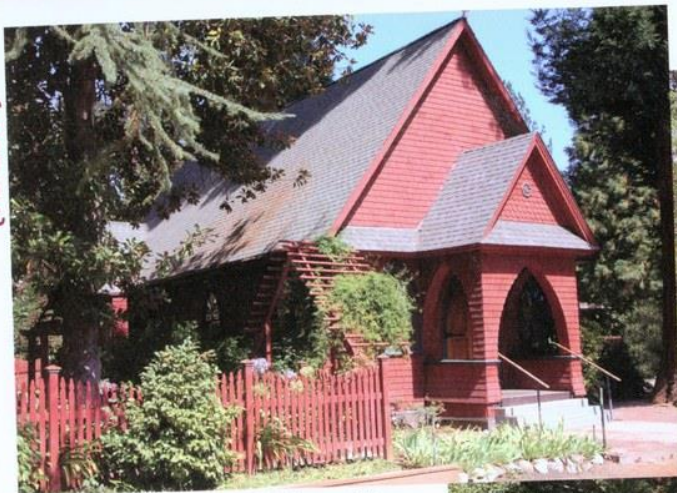
Boulder Creek has a well-defined

Representing the spirit of times gone by a lumberyard with this classic sign still lives on in downtown Boulder Creek.



The swimming hole in Boulder Creek has always been a favorite. Recently landscaped with state bond funds, Junction Park is small but first class.

Photo: Frank Perry Collection



Saint Andrews Church, one of the community hubs of Ben Lomond, was built from old growth redwood in 1899.

downtown and main street (Highway 9) with businesses you'd expect in any old-fashioned town: grocery stores, a hardware store, a pharmacy, a pet store, and a lumberyard. There are no stoplights or parking meters. The building that houses Mac's Place antique store dates from the 1890s. Next door sits an 1885 building with giant doors; it used to be a livery stable where stagecoaches picked up visitors and took them to the new California Redwood Park (now known as Big Basin).

No discussion of Boulder Creek culture would be complete without mentioning its other museum, the Digibarn. Tucked away in the nearby hills, the computer museum's location remains unknown to most people; it's generally not open to the public. Although nothing in the Digibarn is very old by typical museum standards, its wonders of the 1970s, '80s and '90s are ancient by tech standards. If you are doing serious research, or were, say, one of the people who helped build the Apple II, you can fill out an online request to visit the facility. Otherwise, tour the collection online (digibarn.com).

A good place to dip a toe in the river is Junction Park, located at the end of Middleton Street. Picnic tables overlook the river, making the spot a popular play area for local kids and families. The park derives its name from its location at the junction of the San Lorenzo River and Boulder Creek. Bear Creek also joins the San Lorenzo just north of here. Old-timers dubbed this area the "Turkey Foot" because of the shape of the three-way confluence on maps.

Ben Lomond: Arts in the redwoods

At the heart of nearby Ben Lomond is Main Street, which runs parallel to the river

and serves as Ben Lomond's cultural hub. Within a few steps are the library, Wilder Hall, Park Hall (home to Mountain Community Theater), the Santa Cruz Mountains Art Center, and Ben Lomond Park.

The nonprofit Santa Cruz Mountains Art Center is hard to miss, with a brightly painted exterior that probably would be illegal in Carmel. Inside, the gallery houses changing shows of ceramics, textiles, baskets, jewelry, paintings, and drawings by local artists. The center also hosts regular art and music classes, including some free and low-cost offerings for children. Their schedule of upcoming shows, classes, and events, is online (MountainArtCenter.org).



Roaring Camp Train passengers get a view of the river and environs that is quite different from what can be seen along Highway 9.

Felton: Home of the Covered Bridge

Of the three principal valley communities, Felton has the most utilitarian feel. It is the Valley's crossroads, where Highway 9, Felton-Empire Road, Mt. Hermon Road, and Graham Hill Road converge. Walk around and enjoy some of Felton's coffee shops and stores, like the Abbot's thrift shop on the east side of Highway 9 (a block south of the stoplight).

One block off of Highway 9 next to Felton-Empire Road is the Faye S. Belardi Memorial Library, which used to be a church. The entrance stairway is steep, the doorways narrow, the aisles overstuffed with books. By modern-day library design standards, the building is all wrong. But it has a cozy feel that will charm people who like to be surrounded by books.

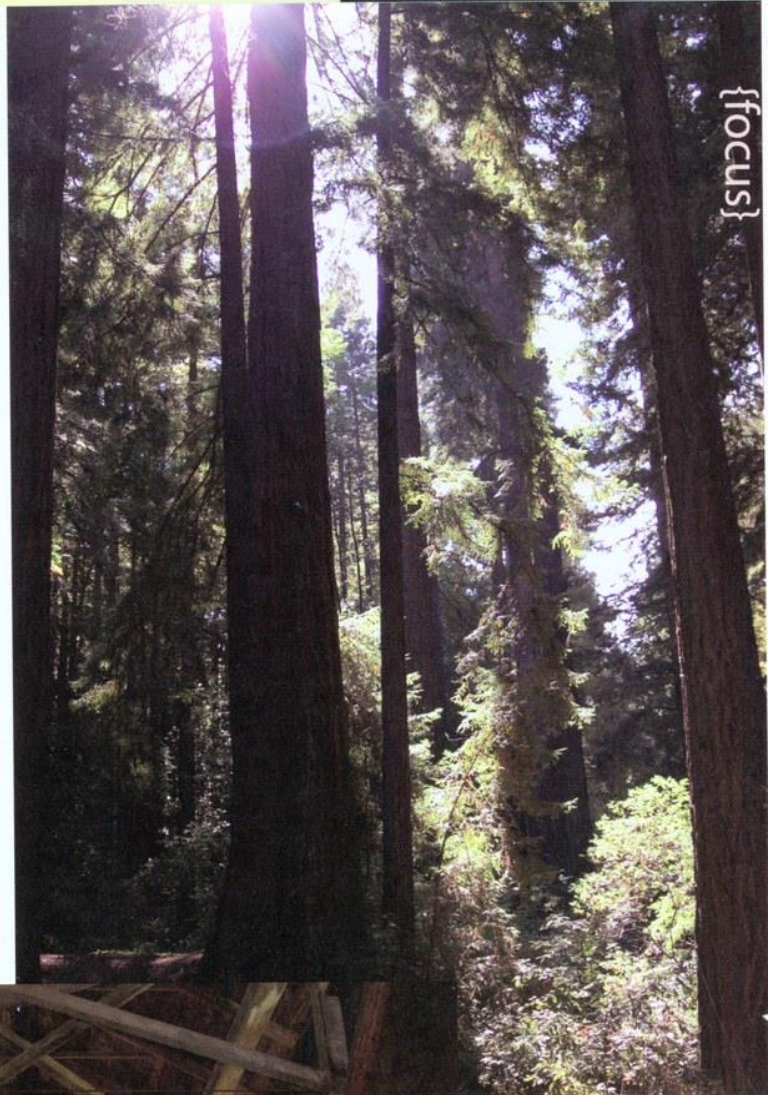
At the intersection of Graham Hill and Mt. Hermon roads lies Covered Bridge Park. Even people from outside the area seek out this park for its playground, ideal for toddlers and young children. At one end, partly hidden by trees, looms the namesake wooden bridge, built in 1892-93. It was the main route over the San Lorenzo River to Felton until a concrete bridge bypassed it in 1937. At 34 feet high, the bridge is believed to be the tallest covered bridge in the nation; it is both a state and national landmark. The curious concrete piers just downstream are remnants of an old railroad bridge.

Henry Cowell Redwoods: Heaven for Nature Lovers

Felton is the gateway to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, one of the oldest and most popular parks in the county. Before it was a state park, the grove of giant redwoods was a county park, and before that a private park known as Welch's Big Tree Grove, developed around the 1870s. Of the park's many features, the giant old-growth redwoods garner the most attention—and deservedly so. Even back in the days when old-growth redwoods blanketed the entire region, this particular grove was special because of its exceptionally large trees.

Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park is one of the best places to explore the San Lorenzo River up close. The river here is a nature-lovers' bonanza with birds, aquatic life, native plants, and interesting geology. The River Trail, which runs parallel to the redwood grove and picnic grounds, provides access in several areas.

"The river and meadow are always a great place for bird watching," says Bob Piwarzyk, a volunteer at the park for over thirty years.



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Originally known in 1870s, as Welch's Big Tree Grove, Henry Cowell Park is still known for the giant old-growth redwoods.

The Felton Covered Bridge is believed to be the tallest covered bridge in the nation.

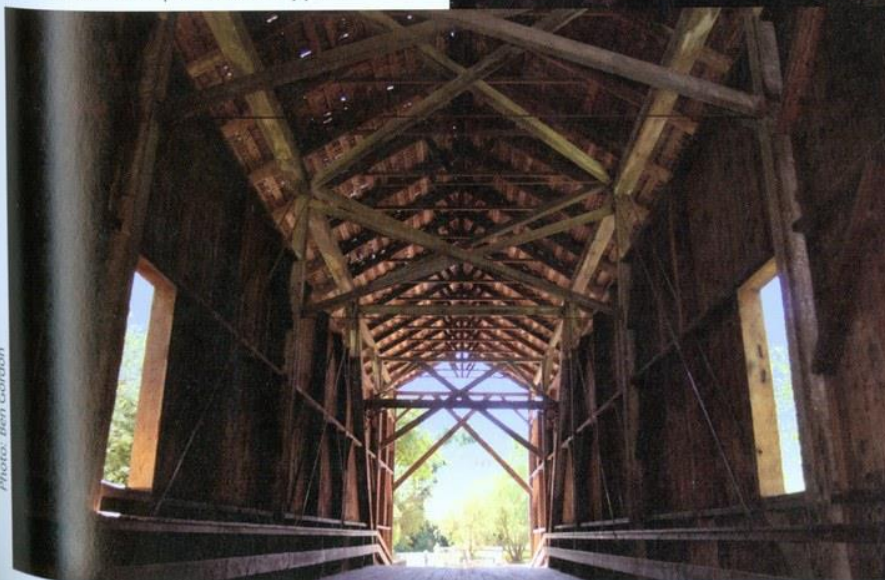
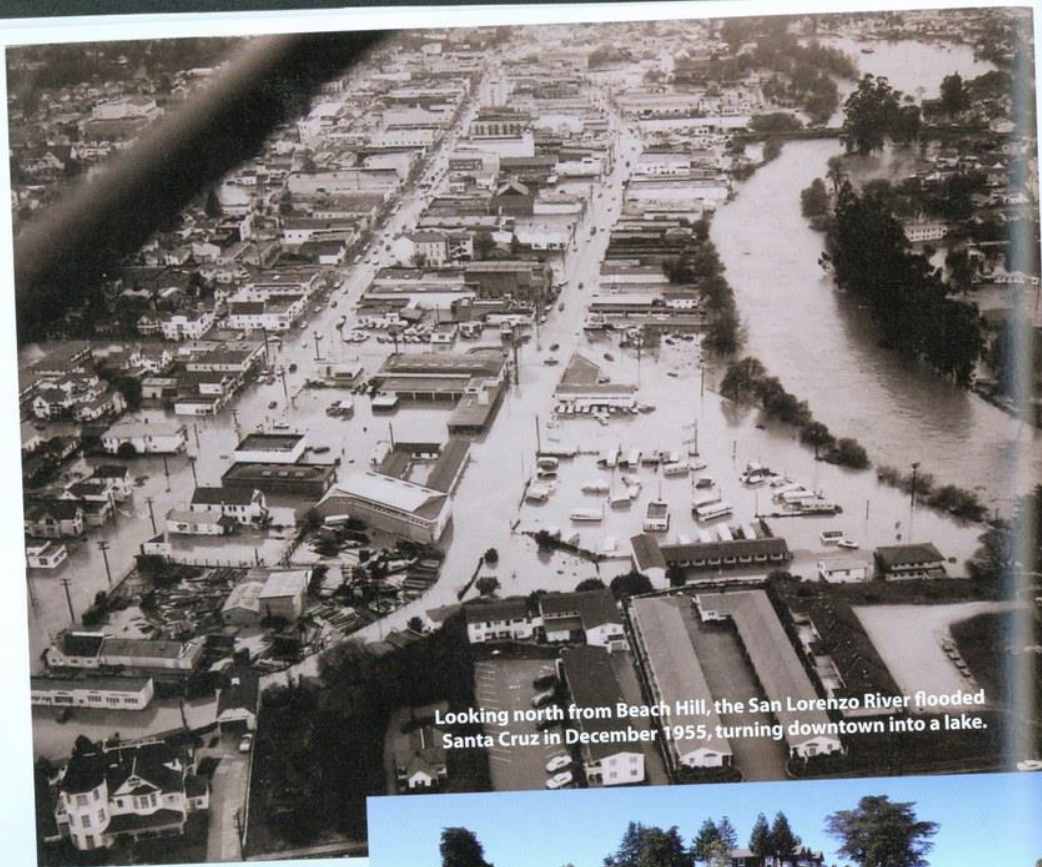


Photo: Ben Gordon



Looking north from Beach Hill, the San Lorenzo River flooded Santa Cruz in December 1955, turning downtown into a lake.

Photo: Courtesy City of Santa Cruz Redevelopment
Photo: Courtesy The Museum of Art & History, Santa Cruz

At the park's southern end, the San Lorenzo River valley narrows to become what's known as "The Gorge." It takes some hiking to get to this area, but it's a great place to explore a lesser-known side of the San Lorenzo. Here the river makes a sharp S-curve around an impenetrable ridge of granite that plunges down the side of Ben Lomond Mountain into the river. In the old days it was called "The Hogsback" and was the bane of road-builders high above. The granite boulders and rapids are reminiscent of the Merced or American rivers in the Sierra. In fact, according to geologists, these rocks once were a part of the Sierra Nevada. They were carried here, at a rate of an inch or two per year, by movement along the San Andreas and other faults.

The park has another Sierra connec-

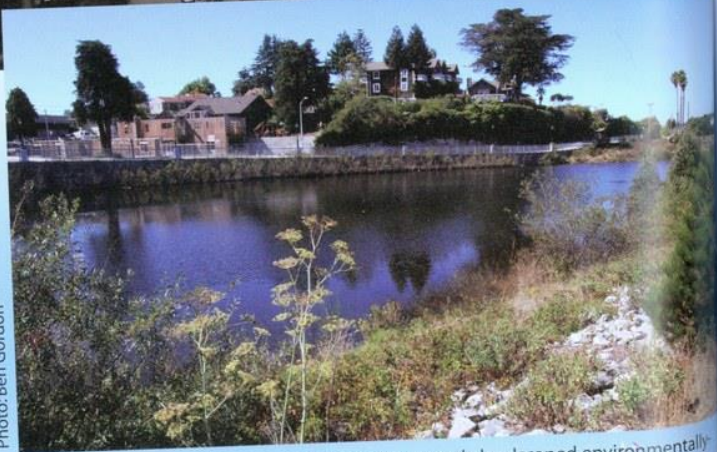
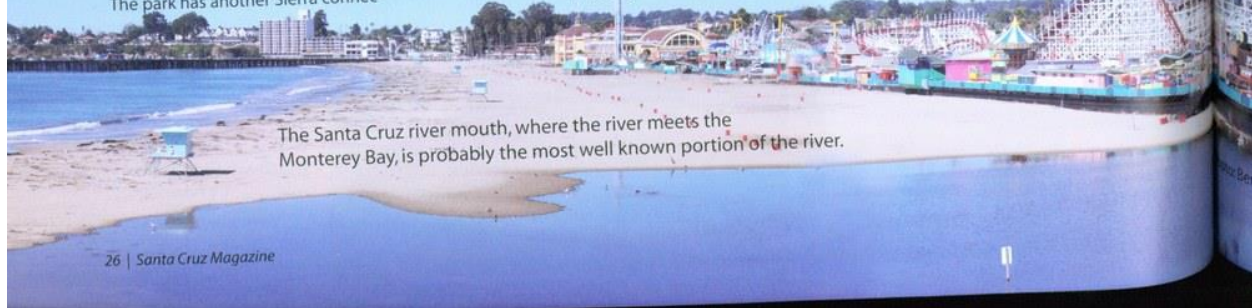


Photo: Ben Gordon

A view of Beach Hill from one of the river's recently landscaped environmentally friendly levees that provide an improved habitat for birds, fish and mammals.



The Santa Cruz river mouth, where the river meets the Monterey Bay, is probably the most well known portion of the river.

tion: Ponderosa Pines grow on the east side along Graham Hill Road. These tall and slender trees, which feature prickly five-inch cones and peculiar jigsaw-puzzle bark, are much more common in places like Yosemite National Park.

With 15 miles of hiking and riding trails through over 1,750 acres, there is much to see in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park.

Roaring Camp: The Wild West

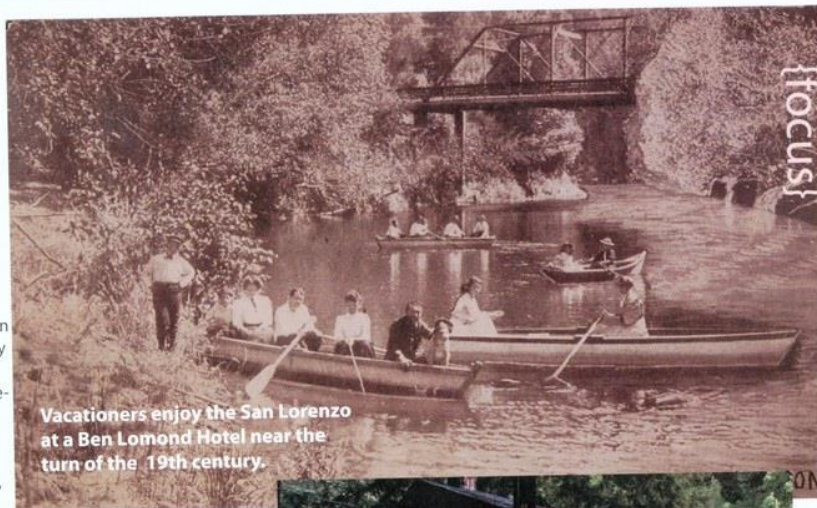
Across the railroad tracks from the park headquarters is Roaring Camp. Its steam train rides and "old west" village have been hugely popular since it was founded in the 1960s. There are special events year-round — sometimes two or three per month — many of them tailored to holidays. There is an Easter egg hunt, Civil War battle reenactments for Memorial Day, a "Ghost Train" for Halloween, and the "Holiday Lights Train" at Christmas-time. Thomas the Tank Engine's visit each July is especially popular with the preschool set, attracting as many as 30,000 people over two weekends.

The train ride between Roaring Camp and Santa Cruz follows the original route blasted along the San Lorenzo River canyon back in 1875. The trip gives riders an inkling of what it was like to ride the popular "picnic trains" that ran between Santa Cruz and the San Francisco Bay area a century ago. In those days the rail line continued north past what is now Roaring Camp and through a series of long tunnels to Los Gatos and San Jose. Originally, the entire route was narrow-gauge, the size used today by Roaring Camp's steam locomotives up Bear Mountain. Today, the line to Santa Cruz is standard gauge.

Paradise Park:

Built on A Powder Keg

Of the many communities along the San Lorenzo River, Paradise Park has the most intriguing history. According to Barry Brown, park resident and historian, it was the site of the "first and largest gunpowder manufacturer on the West Coast." Founded in 1861, the California Powder Works operated until 1914. Today it is a private residential area owned by the Masonic Club, but people who want to take a walking tour are welcome to visit. From the entrance on Highway 9, proceed about 0.6 miles down Keystone Way to the



Vacationers enjoy the San Lorenzo at a Ben Lomond Hotel near the turn of the 19th century.

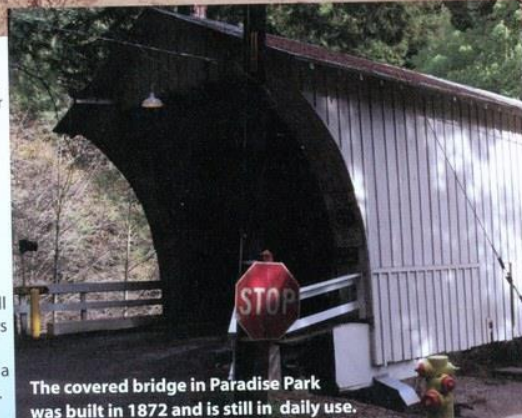
park office (turn left at the tennis court) to get directions or purchase a self-guided tour booklet with maps (\$5).

Some of the private residences are converted mill houses where ingredients for the explosives (saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal) were mixed together. There is also a quaint covered bridge over the river, built in 1872 and still in use. The park office displays a motorized model of the powder-making process and a collection of smaller artifacts. Don't overlook the 100- and 300-pound cannon shells that were fired into the hillsides to test the powder.

Santa Cruz:

Where the River Meets the Bay

As the San Lorenzo flows through the City of Santa Cruz, it shows yet another side—its unnatural side—sculpted in the late 1950s by bulldozers and cranes. Even though the river flows through the heart of the town, the giant levees conceal it from the daily lives of most Santa Cruzans. People in cars might catch, at most, a fleeting glimpse while passing over a bridge. Longtime area residents, however, remember a very different river, one where children played along its banks and

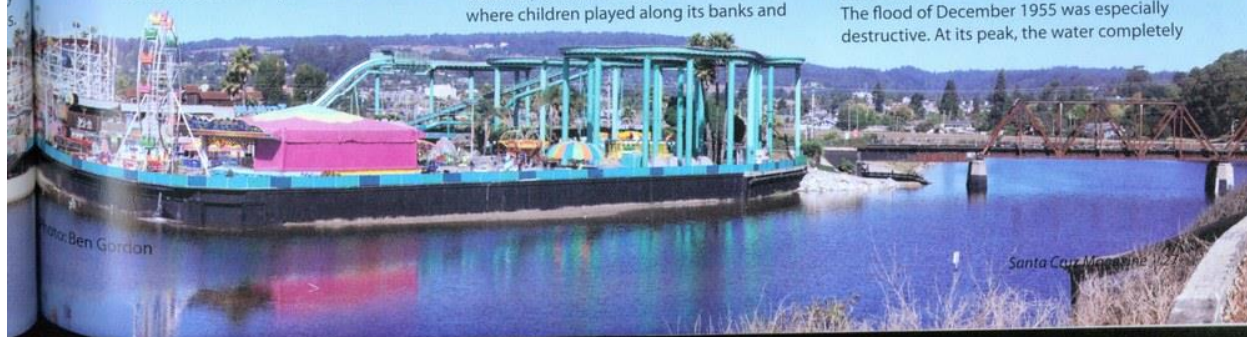


The covered bridge in Paradise Park was built in 1872 and is still in daily use.

built rafts, where fishermen gathered by the hundreds each year at the start of steelhead season, where houses clung to its willow-covered banks, and where people fed ducks from their backyards. Back in the 1890s the river hosted annual water carnivals with floats, boat races, and musical entertainment.

But the untamed San Lorenzo had a dark side. About every ten years or so, during particularly heavy rainstorms, the river would spill over its banks and flood neighborhoods perched beside it. A pear orchard near the Riverside Hotel was a frequent victim, as was Chinatown at the foot of Cooper Street, and the business district along lower Front Street. The flood of December 1955 was especially destructive. At its peak, the water completely

Photo: Courtesy The Museum of Art & History, Santa Cruz.



covered parking meters on Pacific Avenue. Downtown looked like a lake, and the shops were a muddy mess.

Conservation: Saving our river

The giant levees — love 'em or hate 'em — have kept the river at bay for fifty years and counting. There are two myths about the levees worth dispelling. One is that they were built by the Army Corps of Engineers. The Army Corps designed them, but it was Granite Construction Company that built them. The second myth is that they were built in response to the flood of 1955. In fact, Santa Cruzans had been campaigning for federal flood-control money since the 1930s. It was not until yet another flood, a smaller one in 1958, that Congress finally appropriated the funds.

Ten years ago a major improvement project raised the levees and bridges several feet to further ensure the river stays in bounds. A paved bicycle/pedestrian trail was installed along the top of the levees, and the banks were landscaped with native trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers. It's not a return to the old San Lorenzo, but some of its softer side has reemerged. Today, the river is basically a wildlife refuge. To appreciate it, a walk along the levees is a must. Hikers can watch ducks paddle about in the shallows and, if lucky, see a Great Blue Heron hunting patiently for a fish.

River conservationists are quick to point out that a healthy, pollution-free river is not only good for fish, wildlife, and the environment in general, but also good for people. After all, a good many of us drink that water. A number of individuals, organizations, and government agencies have been working to clean up the river.

"There have been a lot of improvements upstream since 1970," says biologist Fred McPherson, who has studied the river for several decades. Although McPherson stresses the positive, he says that two major problems remain: "One is water quantity. The other is water quality." With increasing population, the demand for water continues to rise. At the same time, runoff, especially from the first rains each fall, carries urban pollutants into the river. Clearly, keeping the river in good health requires continual vigilance. ♣

Help Protect Our River

Save Our Shores

www.saveourshores.org

Lompico Watershed Conservancy

www.lompicocreek.org

Valley Women's Club of the San Lorenzo Valley

www.vwcweb.org

Photo: Ben Gordon

A serene section of the river where it passes through Henry Cowell State Park.