

# History gives us something to sniff at

**S**ANTA CRUZ used to stink. Most places around here did. A signature smell announced each town and even on the darkest of nights, you always knew where you were. I believe that Mother Nature invented odors as nighttime navigational aids — not only to let us know where we are (Gilroy already?) but also to help us find out what we've stepped in.

When I was a kid, Santa Cruz's dominant odor was that of the sea — a rich, pungent combination of rotting seaweed, salt water, sea lion offal and fish guts. The Boardwalk was cotton candy, caramel corn and the metallic smell that the merry-go-round rings left on my fingers. The wharf was creosote (kids called it telephone pole smell) and if you were unlucky, a walk on the beach could coat your feet with pungent tar goo which only my mother's nail polish remover could cut.

Don't misunderstand, I am not arguing in favor of re-introducing pollution just to expand our odor palates, but you have to admit that we sanitized the air to such an extent that it won't be many generations before our noses will atrophy and fall off.

Take the smell of burning fall leaves, for example. What is fall without the smell of a pile of leaves burned at curbside?

With the shifts in our local economy (when's the last time you heard someone say they were planning to build a factory?), and our determined effort to purify the air, the distinctive civic odors are down to a precious few. Watsonville has held on to its vinegar, but what will replace it once the apple orchards are finally gone?

Soquel also had its own vinegar from the Santa Cruz Fruit Company and, of course, there was the mushroom plant. People used to forecast the weather in Soquel by whether or not they could smell the mushroom plant. Even today, an early morning steelhead fishing foray on Soquel Creek is punctuated by Maddock's Bakery when the wind is right, and that heavy, oak and acid smell behind Bargetto's Winery.

Capitola is trying to get rid of the pervasive smell of duck excrement. I can't really blame them for that one.

Some California cities have held on to their odors at all costs. Or the cost of full employment. The Spreckels sugar factory outside Manteca is one of my favorites.

## Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

(Talk about a public-relations challenge — a town whose name means "lard"!)

Beet sugar factories stink. No two ways about it, and when Watsonville had its sugar decade from 1888 to 1898, the smell of the factory was canceled out by the smell of the money the plant generated for the community. Same with Monterey and its row of canneries and reduction plants. The smell of money in Monterey neutralized the worst odor, and nature mercifully numbed the nose so that when visitors to Monterey asked, "How can you stand that smell?", Montereyans responded, "What smell? Oh, that. You get used to it."

Salinas gets the local prize for civic odiferousness, particularly that phalanx of pantry smells along Highway 101 south of town. Chocolate. Strawberry jam. Cinnamon. Makes you turn your head and smile even when the airplane-guided highway patrol officer pulls you over for speeding.

The prize for historical odor generation in this region has to go to the Pacific Sea Products whaling station which operated at Moss Landing from 1919 to 1924. You could smell that baby in Santa Cruz when the wind was wrong, and visitors to the plant often vomited before their tour even began. Which might help explain why some worked so hard to get Humphrey out to sea and on his way again. There is nothing more gut-wrenching than the smell of a rotting whale carcass.

Of course, it really depends on who or what is sniffing the air. During the 1860s, when the local grizzly bear population was at its height, bears would race from all over the country should a whale carcass wash up on the beach. Woe the foolish settler who stood be-



1919: Crowd gathers at Moss Landing Whaling Factory to watch a whale being hoisted up the ramp. Strong odors emanating from the plant often made spectators ill.

Monterey City Library

tween a grizzly and a rotting whale. (The grizzly on the Santa Cruz County seal is pointed to the left, appropriately, sniffing the air for deceased cetaceans.)

The number of distinctive ambient odors may be declining (communities had slaughterhouses to help you know when you'd left town) but our internal memory tracks continue to capture and record present-day substitutes, even if they are wimpy. Like fax machine paper and copy-machine ton-

er. (Can you imagine a newspaper column 20 years from now waxing nostalgic over the memory of changing the toner bottle?) I will admit to a fondness for mimeograph-machine fluid, and even after I began teaching, I always took a deep snort of the fresh exams before handing them out. Helped me get through the day.

Magazine publishers understand the decline of ambient odor better than anyone else. Where the distinctive but noxious odor of rubber

tires burning at the dump (remember the dump near Candlestick Park which made us call the place Candlestick?) used to reside in our memory, magazines are inserting perfumes. Not delicate, subtle perfumes: bold, heavy, grainy perfumes which drift up in brownish clouds as you leaf through the magazine. More than once lately I have asked a woman, is that you? Or are you just carrying a magazine?

This column confirms what you

knew already, right? Compared to modern life, history stinks.

*Sandy Lydon is a lecturer and writer about things historical. You can see him discussing the weather and matters historical on the evening news on KCBA Channel 35. He also hosts a Sunday show, "Backyard Adventures," at 9:30 a.m. and midnight on KCBA. Today's show features an overview of Santa Cruz's history of flood, fire and earthquake.*