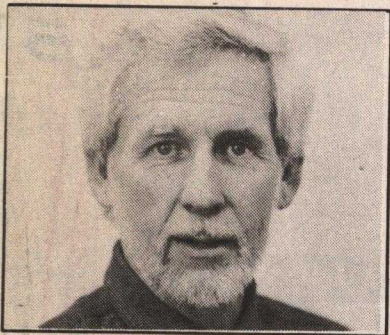


Storms uncover a beachfront mystery

Lydon, Sandy

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

SEASONAL MIGRATIONS are very much a part of the rhythms of the Monterey Bay region; the comings and goings of monarch butterflies, gray whales, salmon and tourists are dependable and well known. There are some less frequent arrivals and departures, however, which can be quite startling.

For example, have you gone down and looked at any of our local beaches the last couple of days? While you were cleaning out your rain gutters and watching Petaluma go under water on the evening news, our beaches up and left.

There's no need to panic. The sand does that every now and then, particularly when we have a series of decent winter storms. Not to worry. It'll be back. (There was a summer in the early 1960s when Capitola's beach did NOT come back, but that was because it was eaten by the new Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor. We'll save that story for another time.)

And, as the beach level drops lower and lower, strange shapes emerge from the sand. Like totems from distant civilizations, rows of pilings appear. Some point out to sea, while others parallel the coast. You might see them and wonder, what the heck are those?



Please see LYDON — C6

Near the yacht harbor are reminders of the Santa Cruz-Capitola streetcar line

Dan Coyro/Sentinel



Special collections, UC Santa Cruz

The Aptos Wharf was a busy spot in the late 1800s. Note in this photo, circa 1885, the esplanade on the right of the wharf.

Lydon

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Well, before the crop circle folks show up and begin to credit them to alien landings (aliens from outer space may dance in the corn, but they don't stay long enough to drive pilings), I will give you a guide to my favorite Wintertime Mysteries. The mysteries are best observed at low tide, so consult the tide tables located elsewhere in this paper and time your visit accordingly.

The wood at Woods

Might as well as begin with the most interesting. Most observers can understand how rows of pilings marching out into the sea would support a wharf for ships, but what are these things doing running PARALLEL with the coast?

The parade of three abreast posts that stand at attention on the beach just east of the Crow's Nest restaurant once supported the streetcar line which connected Santa Cruz and Capitola. Begun as a horse-car line in 1890, the train was beefed up and electrified in 1902, and from that time until 1926, you could board the streetcar and ride from Santa Cruz to Capitola, crossing Wood's Lagoon on this trestle along the way. The pilings were exposed by the recent storms and are now ready for your inspection.

(The very best source on Santa Cruz County's half-century street railroad history is Charles McCaleb's 1977 classic, "Surf, Sand and Streetcars." The book is out of print, but the library has a copy and sometimes used ones show up at Logos. If you find a copy, take a look at the photo of the trestle on page 75.)

The Hawaiian connection

Park at the Rio del Mar Esplanade, cross the concrete bridge over Aptos Creek (a nice chocolate color these days) and then drop down on the beach. Line yourself up with the end of the bluff, and if it is low tide, you should be able to see the tops of the pilings just to the right of the creek as you face the ocean.

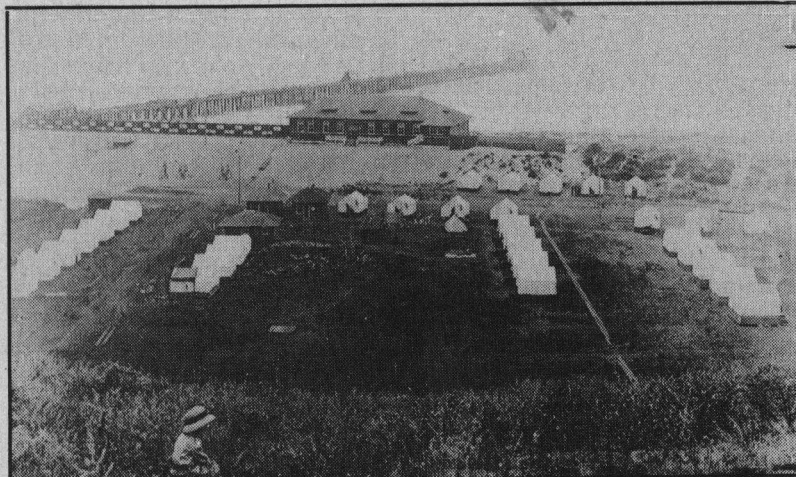
The Aptos wharf went through two incarnations, the first being in 1867 when Titus Hale leased the beach and bluff from Rafael Castro. Hale built a 1,100 foot wharf from which he shipped shingles, shakes, agricultural produce and thousands of cords of oak firewood. Like all of the wharves on the bay, the Aptos Wharf was pounded hard by winter storms and Hale had to replace 200 feet of the wharf in 1868.

With the completion of the Santa Cruz Railroad in 1876 the wharf fell into disuse. The wharf was rebuilt in 1880 by Claus Spreckels



Sandy Lydon collection

All that remains of the Aptos Wharf these days is these pilings heading out to sea.



The ocean was not kind to Watsonville's Port Rogers.

(he had purchased most of Castro's land in the 1870s) and for a time Aptos redwood lumber was shipped out across the wharf to Hawaii where Spreckels was busy trying to run both his sugar business and the government of the Hawaiian Kingdom. After Spreckels was thrown out of the islands in 1886 he no longer needed the wharf. By the end of the century the wharf was in bad shape and rarely used.

The Aptos wharf pilings were just beginning to emerge from the sand when I checked the other day, but if you visit at low tide you should be able to see them, pointing out to sea and Aptos's Hawaiian connection.

Port Folly

This last set will require a bit of a walk (a one-mile round trip), but

it is a great excuse to take a wintertime walk on the beach. Park your car at the Palm Beach parking lot at the end of Beach Road, walk up through the eucalyptus trees hunkered down behind the dune (a clue as to how the wind howls through here most of the time) and turn right and walk along the beach until you pass the Shorebirds condominiums. About 50 yards or so beyond the last stairway begin to watch for the heads of pilings to pop up about 75 yards out in the surf line.

Depending on your viewpoint, these pilings are a monument to either persistence or folly. Pajaro Valley farmers had been looking for a way to ship their products (first potatoes, then wheat) to market from the 1850s. Numerous schemes using surf boats off the

beach were used prior to the arrival of the railroad in the valley in the early 1870s. The first full-fledged wharf built on this spot was completed in 1903 and stretched 1,300 feet into the sea to get enough depth for coastal steamers. This first wharf was part of a complex named Port Rogers (with all due respect, at this location the word "port" is an oxymoron), and was pretty much destroyed by storms by 1904.

The promoters of the 1,700 foot, \$100,000 replacement built on the same spot in 1912 claimed that it was the longest on the Pacific Coast. They named it Port Watsonville, but the ocean showed little respect for either the expenditure or the name. A month after it was completed the ocean bit 100 feet off the end, and the next year was a series of disasters as the developers repaired the wharf and the ocean knocked it apart. A little over a year later the wharf and the company that operated it went into receivership. What was left of it was dismantled in 1917, and what you see out there is all that is left.

I've often thought that the wintertime ocean lets us see these hidden pilings every once in awhile to remind us of the futility of building anything permanent along this coast. Everything we have built along Santa Cruz County is transitory — all those sea walls, all that rip rap, all those groins (yes, even Seaclyff's cement ship, the Palo Alto) are destined for long-term sand storage. It's just a matter of time.

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