

Firm played big role in county's history

Tanneries
AMONG NOTABLE ACTIONS,
LAST OF LEATHER MAKERS
BROKE COLOR BARRIERS

By Ken McLaughlin
Mercury News

Tourists may know Santa Cruz County for its surf, boardwalk and Mystery Spot.

But local history junkies know it for its Three L's: limestone, lumber and leather.

"One of the things that made Santa Cruz County history so much fun is that the three L's were all still here," said historian Sandy Lydon, referring to the Davenport cement plant, Big Creek Lumber and Salz Leathers.

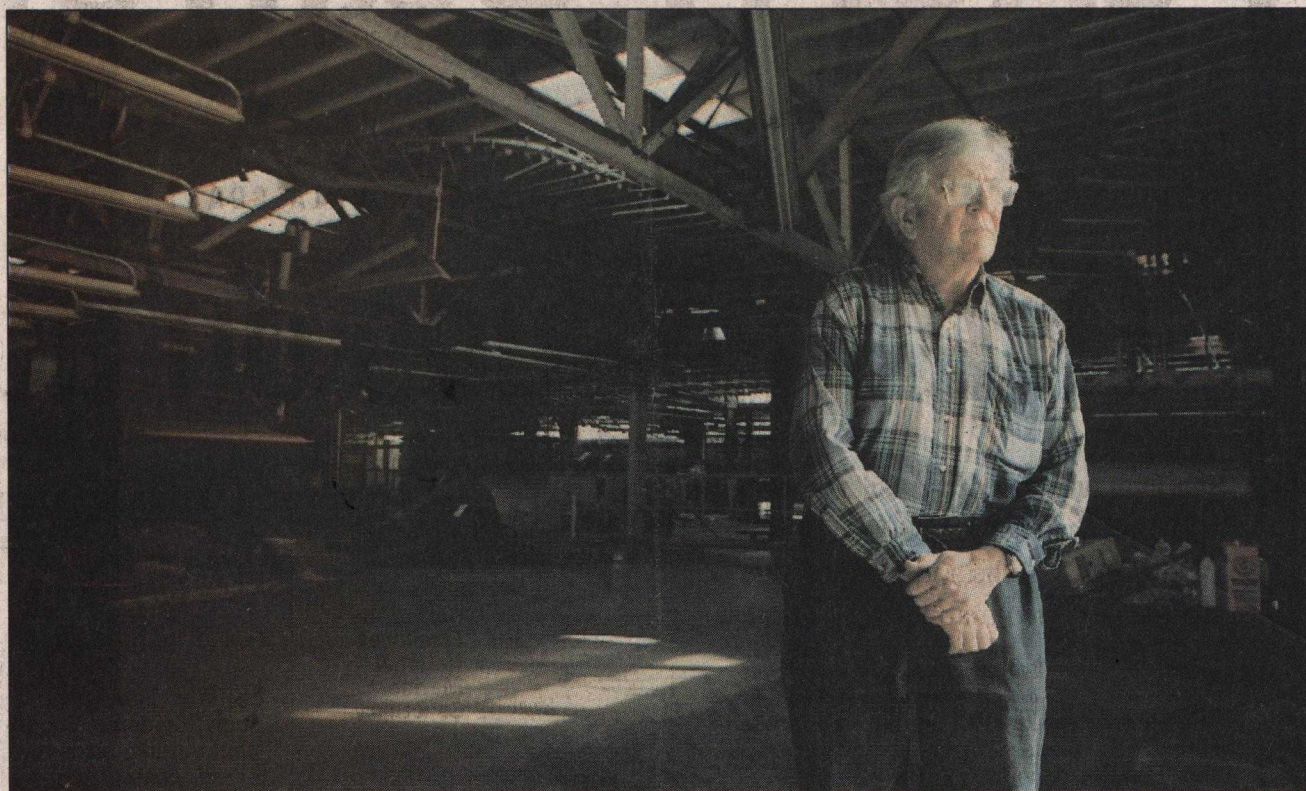
Now, with the demise of the Salz tannery, one "L" is gone for good.

The tannery that is now named Salz was originally built on the site in the late 1840s, but it was washed away by winter storms in 1862. Prussian immigrant Jacob Kron purchased it four years later and rebuilt it.

In 1929, Ansley Salz bought the plant with partners Stuart Miller and Joseph Bellas.

When Salz chairman Norman Lezin got into the leather business, California had 13 tanneries, stretching from Los Angeles to Ukiah. One by one they died. Four decades later, only Salz was left.

Lezin, born three-quarters of a century after the tannery opened, has read volumes about the heady old days. He compares the tannery entrepreneurs of the late 19th century to the Internet pioneers of the late 20th century.



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Salz Leathers chairman Norman Lezin entered the business when California had 13 tanneries, stretching from Los Angeles to Ukiah. Four decades later, only Salz was left.

In the late 1800s, a half-dozen Santa Cruz tanneries churned out leather for saddles, oxen whips, train seats and even belts for steam engines and water-powered engines, helping to turn the wheels of the Industrial Revolution.

"If you weren't into leather, you were a nobody," quipped Lezin, who

got into the business the old-fashioned way: marrying the boss's daughter, Margaret Salz.

Lezin became tannery president at age 29 in 1954, the same year Ansel Adams — a friend of Ansley Salz and his wife, Helen — spent weeks photographing the plant. Several years before, the company made a

traveling case for President Truman.

Salz also became famous for something else: hiring minority workers.

"When I was growing up in the '60s, it was about the only place in town that hired black workers," said Geoffrey Dunn, a Santa Cruz histori-

an. "I look at pictures from my Bay View Elementary School class. A fifth of the kids were black, and most of their dads worked at the tannery."

"Norm was extremely bold to do that. Old Santa Cruz was really opposed to it."

In the last three decades, most of the black workers left for better jobs or moved away from the county, and they were usually replaced by Mexican immigrants. But a handful of African-Americans who had worked at the cannery for decades stayed until the end.

A decade ago, Salz earned another distinction. The Monterey Bay Air Quality Resources Board called the tannery the biggest polluter in Santa Cruz County. The solvents that the tannery used helped form ozone, the main ingredient in smog.

But by September 1995, officials at the pollution control agency attended a lunchtime picnic to receive a letter of praise from tannery president Jeremy Lezin, Norman's son. The firm saluted the agency for making the company modify its procedures to cut down on emissions of solvents.

Executives at Salz said the modifications resulted in a higher-quality product and cut costs for labor and chemicals.

"Salz had always managed to survive. They bobbed. They weaved. They shifted their product lines," Lydon said. "They were one of the county's great players. This is a huge, huge loss."

Contact Ken McLaughlin at
kmclaughlin@sjmercury.com or
(831) 423-3115.