

Old Santa Cruz

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In the old days, about the seventies, there were many more springs, streamlets, sloughs and watersheds than today. The disappearance resulted in most instances from filling in with earth.

While the Neary lagoon still remains, in name at least, a great change has resulted in the lagoon itself. Unless one were told, it hardly could be believed that in the old days a great body of water lay there, surrounded in places by bulrushes.

Now the water comes to an end at the lower end of the Santa Cruz-Davenport railroad branch.

Then the lagoon covered the entire section between the two banks above the Bay street viaduct, covering where the parking lot now is and for some distance to the south.

An inlet and outlet was excavated through the sand rock below the Cowell lot. This was about four feet wide and six feet deep. Children waded in the lagoon and small boys used its waters for sailing their fully rigged boats.

The lagoon began to disappear at this end when the Santa Cruz-Watsonville railroad was constructed. A fill was placed in the center of the lower end with water remaining on either side of it. On one side could be found many mud turtles basking in the sun on the sand rock below what then was an oak tree-bordered road, the end of Chestnut avenue. That was one of the streets leading to the beach but it was shortened when the railroad yard was extended to the Blackburn orchard on the west side, and the Southern Pacific warehouse and engine house were built.

In those days, watchers could see great flocks of ducks light on the broad expanse of water which was the Neary lagoon. Great numbers of mallards, widgeons, spoon bills, blue bills, fan tails, teals, butter balls, saw bills, canvas backs, red heads and sprigs would land in water hidden by the rushes.

Sometimes a flock of wild geese would use the Neary lagoon for a resting spot.

The area was a great hunting ground. Of course, most of the birds there were mudhens, even as now. Also there were many snipe, and a lot of these were shot and eaten.

There was no law then against shooting within the city limits, and every day was open season for something, and nearly every day the explosions of single or double-barreled shotguns could be heard from the Neary lagoon.

Hunters would be equipped with powder and shot. Some of them carried gun wads, but many would use their ramrod to ram paper down if they did not have the manufactured wads.

The hunters were proud to carry their powder or shot in home made horns. They would go to a slaughterhouse and select the best possible horn and scrape it carefully and polish it brightly before using it. Sometimes they would ornament the horns.

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The Neary lagoon today is a refuge for wild birds and they flock there as though they had knowledge it is an area which offers them protection.

Not far from the Neary lagoon was the Blackburn lagoon. It was back of the Blackburn residence now standing at the foot of Sycamore street. It was back from the barn and the windmill and was surrounded by willows, sycamores and water maples. There was a large grove of maples at the north end as Center street then was a blind street, coming to a stop at this grove and a thicket of wild blackberries below Laurel street.

Frequently the writer went to this lagoon with friends and got enjoyment out of traveling on the water aboard a home-made raft. With the extension of Center street, the trees went before the axe and the land was filled in so it now is a level street.

The largest slough backed up from the San Lorenzo river and was considerably deeper and wider. At high tide, it was as much as eight feet deep. Where it began at the Cliff street steps, it was the deepest swimming hole along the river, provided the warmest water, and was a favorite spot for the boys.

Another big fill was for the extension of Laurel street to the Third street intersection. Where once there was a slough bordered with marshes now there are motels, trailer courts and garages. Earth was brought from many sections of the city for this fill.

The next largest lagoon was out in the Potrero, another pond surrounded by a marsh. It was along the right-of-way of the Santa Cruz-Felton railroad, later known as the South Pacific Coast railroad and now the Southern Pacific railroad. It was crossed by a rather long trestle which later was replaced by a fill. This lagoon was on the well-known old Imus ranch and started at the end of the Mission orchard.

Not far from this pond, heading toward town, at the turn on River street at the entrance to what is now the El Rio camp ground was a clear body of water fed by springs just below the street. There was a path through the grass and bushes, worn by the feet of those who were thirsty, and the banks always were green with grass and occasional clumps of willows.

This disappeared when the trees were cut and filling took place and homes were built, although when the river overflowed the houses were in the path of the rising water.

In this section was the only waterfall of any size in the city. It was one of the Tres Ojos springs which rolled over the high bluff and it made a beautiful sight as it poured over and splashed below and finally ran through a culvert and into the San Lorenzo just north of the Water street bridge.

Just outside the city limits, near Sycamore Flat and across the Big Tree road to the south of Wildcat gulch was another small lagoon. It was surrounded by trees and tules, but it disappeared when the road was widened and a hill was lowered, the earth being used to fill the pond.

In the old days, there was an old fashioned picket fence separating the road and the pond, part of the Cowell holdings.