

LYDON, Sandy

Myth-busting: the downtown 'tunnels'

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

MYTH NO. 3 — Tourism has always been the mainstay of Santa Cruz's economy. The truth is: No. Early Santa Cruz was a city of mills and factories built on the combination of abundant natural resources and dependable water power. Santa Cruz was known first for its lumber, paper, blasting powder, lime, fuses and leather. Despite its puny size, Santa Cruz County was a leading manufacturing county in California in the 1880s and Santa Cruz was the most "American" (non-Hispanic) city in the region.

As the natural resources declined (tanbark for the tanneries was being imported from Monterey County in the 1890s) and access over the mountains improved, Santa Cruz came to depend increasingly on the sustained use of the local scenery and climate by tourists. When the first beach-front Casino was built in 1904, Santa Cruz hitched its economic wagon to the shirt-tails of the day-tripping, over-the-mountain tourists.

The origin of this Santa Cruz-as-tourist-destination myth is based upon the common tendency to project the present back into the past, building some comforting and familiar continuity. Which would be perfectly harmless, except that projecting tourism back into the 1860s-70s makes it impossible to see the fundamental economic, social and ethnic underpinnings which influence Santa Cruz to this day.

MYTH NO. 4 — Originally, Santa Cruz County was covered with trees and the early pioneers cut them down. No. Actually there are more trees growing in Santa Cruz County today than there were in 1850, especially on the coastal terrace between Santa Cruz and Aptos. The Ohlone Indians ate both the grass seeds and newly sprouted grass shoots, and they burned the coastal terraces each year to encourage the growth of the native grasses. The repeated burning kept the terraces clear of trees. When Euro-American settlers moved into the county, they introduced tree species such as eucalyptus. Monterey



Cynthia Mathews photos

Camp Capitola, summer, 1875. Looking east, with Depot Hill in the background showing effects of Indian burning and later cattle ranching. No trees.



The importance of this notion about the trees is that it causes confusion about what is "natural" in Santa Cruz County. If "natural" means original wilderness untouched by the hand of man, then there is no such place in the county. Every square foot of Santa Cruz County has been messed with in some way. Changed. Used.

The discussions about returning parts of the county to their pristine, natural, untouched-by-human hands state are actually discussions about what state of "altered" to return to. For example, if you wanted to take Live Oak, Aptos or Capitola back to their pre-European state, you would have to begin by cutting down the trees.

MYTH NO. 5 — Horses are not allowed in the forest of Nisene Marks State Park because a member of the Marks family was killed by a horse. Some variations of this myth have Marks family members being frightened by or falling from horses. They are all incorrect. Herman Marks, Nisene's son and the guiding force behind getting the property into the state park system, did not like what horses did to hiking trails, particularly in steep country. Convinced that horses would quickly tear out any trails in the proposed park, Marks insisted that a restriction prohibiting horseback riding in the park be included in the deed. Thus, horseback riding is prohibited on the original 19,000 acre parcel of the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park.

MYTH NO. 6 — The holes beneath the buildings along Pacific Avenue are actually part of a tunnel system beneath Santa Cruz drilled by the Chinese. No. The holes are basements and in many instances, particularly at the north end of Pacific Avenue, the basements were 19th century saloons. The notion that the Chinese always had a rabbit warren of tunnels beneath their Chinatowns is one of the most persistent myths in the Monterey Bay area.

I think that this myth about the Chinese originated from two sources. The first is the fact that the Chinese drilled tunnels. Between 1876 and 1880 in this county, they drilled over two miles of railroad tunnels through the Santa Cruz mountains during the construction of the South Pacific Coast Railroad. Chinese tunnel workers also punched several flumes through ridges in the mountains. One of the longest flumes diverted part of the San Lorenzo River through a ridge at the California Powder Works in present-day Paradise Park. Those tunnels represent one of the most remarkable accomplishments of human labor in the history of this county, but the Chinese tunnel workers who risked and some-

ery vice known (and even some that were unknown) was practiced by the Chinese. Dime novels and early movies helped perpetuate this sinister, Fu Manchu stuff about the Chinese. It is all junk.

The truth is that the Chinese in Santa Cruz were laundrymen, merchants, cooks and had houseboys with little energy left at the end of their workday to do recreational tunneling beneath their rented buildings. Besides, the Chinese

knew, even if their white counterparts did not, that Chinatown and all of downtown Santa Cruz was on a flood plain. With the annual flooding of the San Lorenzo River, any tunnels beneath Santa Cruz' Chinatown would have been filled with water most of the time.

Sandy Lydon is a local lecturer, instructor and writer on matters historical.

repeated burning kept the terraces clear of trees. When Euro-American settlers moved into the county, they introduced tree species such as eucalyptus, Monterey cypress and Monterey pine all across the terrace.

The Bayview Hotel in Aptos actually had a view of the bay when it was first constructed, but trees now obscure it. The Sesnon family could sit on their first-floor veranda and see Monterey Bay. Today several ranks of Monterey pines and eucalyptus block the Sesnon House view. Depot Hill in Capitola was bald as a billiard ball.

This myth of a tree-covered county probably originated with the projection of Atlantic Seaboard



Seacliff, Aptos, 1930. Cement ship, Palo Alto, in place in foreground but pier out to it incomplete. Note treeless, coastal terrace.

settlement history on to the California coast. I remember very clearly my Hollister grammar school teachers explaining that settlers always cut down the trees,

pulled up the stumps and planted corn — one fish head per three corn kernels. Not in coastal California they didn't. Settlers planted trees.

tunnels represent one of the most remarkable accomplishments of human labor in the history of this county, but the Chinese tunnel workers who risked and sometimes lost their lives in those tunnels were professional tunnel workers who moved on once their work was completed.

The second source of the Chinese-always-drilled tunnels myth is rooted in all the stuff about how "mysterious" and "exotic" the Chinese were. Whites peered into Chinatowns wondering what the Chinese were "up to," and imagined all manner of things. With a small leap of imagination, the opium parlors and gambling halls went underground into tunnels where ev-