

The Santa Cruz Wharf

By Ross Eric Gibson

The 80-year-old Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf has been undergoing its first face lift in 30 years. The past few years have seen new wharf-style rough plank buildings constructed, streamers, night-lighting and elimination of parking meters. A project to improve the wharf entrance is nearing completion.

The Municipal Wharf is only the most recent of the six wharves that have graced the "harbor," a term long used to describe the area between Lighthouse Point and the San Lorenzo River mouth. With the town's wealth of agriculture, lumber, leather, lime and gunpowder, early Santa Cruz developed as the second major port city in Northern California. The waterfront was expected to become the city's downtown, with Main Street laid out on Beach Hill. But circumstance did not oblige.

Prior to the wharves, lumber was floated through the surf to ships, and goods were ferried out on rowboats. This didn't always keep things dry, and splashed sacks of potatoes and produce could start to rot on the way to market. Female passengers were brought ashore by rowboats, then carried through the surf in the arms of sailors.

In 1849, town founder Elihu Anthony built an inclined wharf at the end of Bay Street, which acted as a chute for loading potatoes onto ships. At the same time, he built the first bridge in the county to give access to his wharf, on West Cliff Drive. It's today the site of the last "Howe strut" bridge in Northern California. The wharf was bought in 1853 by the Jordan and Davis Limeworks, which became Henry Cowell Limeworks in 1867.

Cowell's wharf collapsed in a storm in 1907. For 50 years after, all that was left was a tall piling, rising from the sea.

The second wharf, slightly west of today's Municipal Wharf, was constructed by David Gharky in 1856 and lengthened in 1863. It was purchased by the South Pacific Coast Railroad in 1875 and became the Railroad Wharf, with tracks running out to the end. Here freight could be unloaded directly onto steamships, and ship passengers could reach county destinations directly by train.

During the Civil War, Gharky constructed a high wharf extending out from Second and Main streets on Beach Hill, to serve the Powderworks, the only gunpowder factory in the west. It became known as the Steamship Wharf when the Pacific Coast Steamship Company made it its local headquarters.

In 1877, a rail line was extended from the Railroad Wharf to the Steamship Wharf via an "S-shaped" connecting wharf. When this link and the Steamship Wharf were demolished in 1882, the steamship company set up offices at the end of the Railroad Wharf.



The Railroad Wharf, undated photo



The Pier at the Boardwalk, 1904

In 1904, the new boardwalk included a pier carrying a pipeline to the plunge building, which filled the pool daily with fresh, heated salt water. It was first called the "Electric Pier" for its night-lighting, then the "Pleasure Pier." Here boat launches brought people to the amusement ship "Balboa" anchored offshore. The pier was torn down around 1965, [actual date according to the S.C. Seaside Company was 1963--RAP, ed.] when the plunge became a miniature golf course.

None of the existing wharves could serve deep-water ships. So, the 3,000-foot Municipal Wharf was constructed in 1914, with its end bent to the west for a steamship dock and freight warehouse. Its original 2,000-plus pilings were 70-foot-long Douglas fir logs driven 21 feet into the ocean floor. The wharf rail line was shifted to the Municipal Wharf, and the old Railroad Wharf became part of a sardine cannery before being demolished in 1922.

The Municipal Wharf's Italian fishing community originated in the 1870s on the Railroad Wharf. Most came from Genoa. Their boats with slanted lateen sails dated back in style to ancient Egypt. The wharf was lined with davits to hoist fishing boats for storage and repairs.

The wharf was alive, with fishermen drying and mending their nets, cleaning their catch, and displaying the large or unusual sea creatures brought up from the deep. A small aquarium on the wharf displayed living specimens donated on a regular basis by the fishermen. Many of the early Italian names are well known from their fishing fleets, fish markets and restaurants at the wharf.

The Stagneros, Castagnolas, Faraolas, Ghios, and Carniglias are still prominent in town. They'll tell you that when the yacht harbor was built in 1963 and the wharf davits were removed, much of the life went out of the wharf. Today fishing, boating, kayaking, sightseeing cruises, para-sailing, scuba diving and shopping have returned some of the vitality of its maritime past.

Sources

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