

1991: Recalling when pirates invaded the bay

History

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following column, titled "When pirates plundered us," was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on Jan. 12, 1991.

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SENTINEL COLUMNIST

With the threat of war looming again it is thousands of miles away from us.

The Santa Cruz area has always

been a safe haven. A violent attack from a foreign force has never been experienced in our area.

Or has it?

A dreaded pirate once threw a frightful scare into these parts. After burning down Monterey.

It is the only time in history where our citizens fled to the hills in panic.

Turn your imaginations back to a black night of November 20, 1818 — not long ago, as time goes. James Monroe was president.

It was cold and tiny sparklets of lamp lights dotted the coastline and the rolling forested hills. Among them

was tucked the village of Branciforte.

Branciforte Avenue was once the main (and only) street in Santa Cruz.

Out on the winter sea, two evil ships eased into the bay, and as the dull early light of dawn made the shore visible, cannon fire violated the peace and iron balls slammed against the flimsy Monterey fort.

How do I know? Well, the Santa Cruz and probably the Watsonville library has a little book written around 1976 by a Monterey teacher of California history.

It was written by Randall A. Reinstedt, called "Tales, Treasures and

Pirates," and published by Ghost Town Publication in paperback.

After that shocking first broadside, a message was sent ashore demanding: the "surrender of your city with all its furniture and other belongings (of the Spanish King). If you do not, the city will be reduced to cinders."

It was signed: Hippolyte de Bouchard.

Pirate!

The rare sound of cannon fire in the quiet of our bay had to be traumatic. It would also get my attention

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Pirates

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today.

Alta California Governor Pablo Sola, who lived in Monterey, must have been startled, but it got his dander up.

He politely returned the message in words that, in effect, told Hippolyte de Bouchard to go to Hell!

That set the scene.

Apparently this was not the politic move to make.

The pirates attacked.

They used small boats with cannons.

The buccaneers made landings just 17 miles across the bay from Mission Santa Cruz.

They overcame a small local force and took the fort.

Which I don't imagine was any Fort Knox.

The townspeople weren't having anything of these going ons.

They took to the hills.

They loaded their belongings onto the family mules.

I mean, some never stopped until they reached the missions of San Juan Bautista and San Antonio (now in the Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation near King City).

The tiny Monterey fort army retreated inland and took a stand near where Salinas now sits.

Retreating to Salinas is hardly taking a stand, but the pirates, (with their eye patches, peg legs, cutlasses, bandanna wrapped heads, growls and grunts — my imagination) must have put on a knee-knocking show.

Riders were sent to San Jose and San Francisco for reinforcements.

So fierce was Bouchard's action and evil reputation, the word reached Branciforte, now part of Santa Cruz.

But instead of attacking the pirates, the Californians preferred to observe the pirates at a distance.

I am not the one to pass judgment, if I know my pirates, so I won't fault them.

Well, the pirates had their way with the village.

They plundered and destroyed orchards and burned the buildings.

So fierce was Bouchard's action and evil reputation, the word reached Branciforte, now part of Santa Cruz.

According to Reinstedt's research, a goodly amount of Branciforte's citizenry also packed their belongings took to the hills.

No doubt the rumor was that the pirates were headed their way to take the Mission Santa Cruz.

A few of Branciforte's braver (and raunchier) citizens remained

behind long enough to "rescue valuable relics from the Mission," so they would not fall into the greedy hands of the pirates.

Some of those valuables so "reverently" saved, they never found their way back to the mission up on the Mission Street hill where Holy Cross church now stands.

According to Reinstedt, the pirates never reached Branciforte.

Bouchard growled his men back to the ships and they sailed away.

When an area makes such a poor showing during a major historical event, it is no wonder we hear so little of it today.