

The Spreckels Era in Rio Del Mar, 1872–1922

By Allen Collins

The ranch lands Claus Spreckels purchased in 1872 for about \$81,000 comprised almost all of today's Rio Del Mar (ca. 1,150 acres), all of today's Seascapes (ca. 500 acres), and nearly 1,000 acres north of today's Highway 1, extending up Aptos Creek, Cathedral Drive, Trout Gulch and Valencia Creeks.

Aptos was a remote village in 1872. It was a two day trip from San Francisco, where the Spreckels maintained their principal residence, a 4-story mansion at the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Washington Street. The preferred stage-coach route over the mountains from Los Gatos was the so-called "Santa Clara Turnpike", completed in 1858 - a wagon road following today's Old San Jose road into Soquel. A secondary route was the so-called "Santa Cruz Turnpike", also completed in 1858—it followed today's Glenwood Road into Santa Cruz. This road, incidentally, became the preferred route when it was paved in 1915, and re-routed as Highway 17 in 1934.

Significantly, there were no connecting railroads into our Santa Cruz County in 1872. The Southern Pacific had completed a road from Gilroy into Monterey the year before—it passed through the village of Pajaro, but did not cross the river into our Santa Cruz County. Our first rail link to the "outside" was the Santa Cruz Railroad Company's line, completed in 1876—it followed the same route as today's trackage through Aptos and Rio Del Mar, and terminated at the Southern Pacific's Pajaro junction. Santa Cruz freight moving in either direction had to be reloaded in Pajaro, for the Southern Pacific system was broad-gauge and the local system was narrow-gauge. This changed, however, when the Southern Pacific purchased the local line in 1882, and broad-gauged it in 1883.

As an aside, the South Pacific Coast Railroad, a narrow-gauge from the San Francisco ferry terminal in Alameda to Santa Cruz, over and through the mountains from Los Gatos, was completed in 1880. This system was purchased by Southern Pacific in 1887, was broad-gauged after the earthquake in 1906, and ceased operations in 1940.

And then, 25-years later, the Ocean Shore Railroad, a broad-gauge system from San Francisco to Santa Cruz along the coast was a dream that never quite came true. By 1906, it was operating over the 14 miles between Santa Cruz and Swanton. By 1908, it was operating between San Francisco and Tunitas Glen. The 26 miles in between were never completed; stage service was provided. Operations ceased in 1920. Much of today's Highway 1 north of Half Moon Bay is on that old railroad bed, including the still troublesome "Devil's Slide" area.

Some words about Claus Spreckels and his family, before we discuss his many contributions to the Aptos/Rio Del Mar area.

Claus Spreckels was born in 1828 and was raised in the little town of Lamstedt, in the independent Kingdom of Hanover. The town exists today, about 30-miles west of Hamburg, Germany.

All of Europe was in political turmoil while Claus was growing up, particularly the various independent "kingdoms" throughout what we now know as Germany and Poland. It was the long, drawn-out so-called European revolution of the 1840's.

Claus ran away from it all. At age 17 he took a ship to New York, alone. He could speak no English. On exchange, he had less than one U.S. dollar when he stepped onto the streets of the big city. He took a job in a grocery store for \$4.00 per month; the boss provided occasional meals and permitted him to sleep in the store. Five years later, in 1849, he could speak English fluently and he understood the grocery business. It was then that he bought a grocery in Charleston, SC, and went into business for himself.

Anna Christina Mangels, his childhood sweetheart, immigrated to New York in 1849 and found work as a maid. They found each other, married in 1852, and had their first child (John D.) in 1853. A couple of years later, they sold their Charleston store and bought a New York grocery. That didn't work out, so in 1856 they headed for California. It was by ship to Panama, by mule across the Isthmus, and by ship to San Francisco. Claus was 28 and Anna was 26 at this time. In San Francisco, it was another grocery store .. on lower Pine Street.

The S.F. store was not enough to keep Claus busy, so he started a brewery in 1857. In 1863, he sold his store for \$50,000 and his brewery for \$75,000 and organized the small Bay Area Sugar Refinery in San Francisco, and this business, like those before, boomed. In 1866, he reorganized and built the California Sugar Refinery in San Francisco to produce 12 tons per day. By 1869, he was producing 60 tons per day. By 1871, 125 tons per day. In 1881, he completed a whole new refinery in San Francisco, producing 900 tons per day! All of this was from sugar cane imported from Hawaii, the Philippines, China, Java and the Sacramento River Delta (by barge). Traditionally, the brand-name for the Spreckels product was "Sea Island Sugar"—remember?

Try to imagine two small farms outside the village of Lamstedt in the independent Kingdom of Hanover, in the mid-1800s—a town of about 2,500 today 30-miles west of Hamburg, Germany. Claus and brother Peter Spreckels grew up on Farm No. 1. Claus and sister Anna Christina Mangels grew up on Farm No. 2. The four kids went to school together. At about the same time, in the Kingdom of Westphalen, further west, Agnes and (twin) sister Anna Lisette Grosse were growing up on Farm No. 3.

In due time, Claus Spreckels married Anna Mangels (1852); Peter Spreckels married Anna Lisette Grosse (1861); and, Claus Mangels married Agnes Grosse (1862). Agnes died in 1875 at age 31, and Claus remarried Emma L. Zweig in 1876, when he was 44 and she was 36.

If that was not enough, the three men acting as a partnership, organized the Bay Sugar Refinery in 1863 and the California Sugar Refinery in 1866, both headquartered in San Francisco. Considerable family fortunes eventually grew from those beginnings.

Claus and Anna Spreckels had 13 children, but only 5 lived to maturity: John D., Adolph B., Claus A., Rudolph, and Emma.

In 1865, at age 37, Claus Spreckels spent 8 months in Germany, studying sugar beet farming and beet sugar refining sciences and technologies not yet applied successfully in the United States. Unquestionably, the economic potential of sugar from beets, to supplement and/or compete against sugar from cane, had much to do with his purchase of ranch property in Aptos in 1872. The fact is, he planted sugar beets experimentally on the palisades of today's Rio Del Mar within months after acquiring the land, and they did well. Thereupon, in 1873, he induced mid- county farmers to grow sugar beets (by guaranteeing to buy their crops), and built a small refinery in today's Capitola, about where the firehouse now stands—it was the California Sugar Beet Co. That little plant operated from 1874 to 1879, producing 3.5 tons per day of finished product during the season. Shipping was out of Soquel Landing (today's Capitola Wharf), and sugar beets soon became an important mid-county crop.

It didn't take Claus Spreckels long to realize that the fertile bottom-lands of the vast Pajaro and Salinas valleys were better suited for sugar beet production than the limited bench-lands of our mid-county. Accordingly, he formed the Western Beet Sugar Co. in 1888, and built an enormous refinery in Watsonville on land donated by Charles Ford; 50 tons per day to start, 700 tons per day in 1892, 1,000 tons per day in 1895. This plant operated for 10 years, until it was superseded by an even larger refinery near Salinas—the town that became Spreckels. In 1898 the new plant was producing 3,000-tons per day! Shipping to/from the Watsonville and Salinas plants was mostly by a private Spreckels-owned narrow-gauge railroad system to/from the docks at Moss Landing.

One could argue that the beet sugar industry in the United States was born on the experimental farms of Claus Spreckels 120 years ago, right here in today's Rio Del Mar.

Almost sadly, the Spreckels' Pajaro Valley Consolidated Railroad became obsolete when good roads and dependable trucks came along; the whole system was sold to the Southern Pacific in 1929 for "land value". And then, on July 31, 1982, the 94 year old Spreckels Sugar Refinery in the town of Spreckels was closed permanently, the victim of "progress" in the chemistry of sweetening and the technology of farming and refining.

A man named Frederick Augusta Hihn (pronounced "heen", another German immigrant) had been a prominent entrepreneur in our country for 20 years before Claus Spreckels arrived. Amongst many other things, Hihn had acquired all of the (undeveloped) land comprising today's Capitola, vast timber resources in the Valencia Creek watershed, and strategic parcels of land in and near Aptos Village. Understandably, when (in 1866) the Southern Pacific announced its plans to build a railroad from Gilroy to Monterey, Hihn started promoting a connecting line into Santa Cruz County. The road to Monterey was completed in 1871. Within weeks after Claus Spreckels purchased his Aptos Ranch in 1872, he joined Hihn in promoting (financially and otherwise) a connecting line into Santa Cruz County—it would pass through his property, as well as Hihn's.

Besides the obvious freight advantages, these men saw the economic potential of tourism in mid-county when travel time to the cool coast from the hot valleys and congested Bay Area cities would be reduced from two days to a matter of hours. Claus Spreckels started building an enormous semi-private resort hotel complex in today's Rio Del Mar "flats"—the "Aptos Hotel"—it opened for business in June, 1875, 11 months before the first through train passed by. Fred Hihn started developing Soquel landing (Camp Capitola) at about the same time, and in 1880 he built a massive logging-lumber camp 3-4 miles up Valencia Creek, complete with a sawmill and a connecting narrow-gauge railroad into Aptos Village.

The main building of Spreckels' "Aptos Hotel" was located near Aptos Creek, on the rise between today's Spreckels and Moosehead Drives, on today's Claus Court. It was huge (170-ft by 130-ft in plan view, 3 stories), and as elegant as it could be in those times: acetylene gas lights in every room, a bathroom on every floor, an elevator (reportedly "the first, south of San Francisco"), enormous high ceiling lobbies and dining rooms beautifully furnished, great verandas with spectacular views across Aptos Creek Lagoon to the beach and bay, manicured landscaping, etc. Across the street (today's Spreckels Drive) was a recreational club, complete with a "game" room, a bowling alley, a bar room, and a convertible dance-hall. Nearby was a gas-lighted pedestrian bridge over the "moat" to "Lover's Retreat", an island (literally) in Aptos Creek, on which was an outdoor dance pavilion under a natural stand of live oaks. "Lover's Retreat" is known today as Treasure Island, although it is no longer an island. On a shelf overlooking the hotel (today's Wixon Drive) were nine "honeymoon cottages", tastefully appointed, with sweeping views. Down the road (today's Treasure Island Dr.) was a vast livery stable and equestrian center for the convenience of guests. A private residence for the manager was on today's Bay View Court. The first manager was B.F. Bauer, formerly the California State Treasurer. The second manager was John Mangels, a nephew of Anna Spreckels. He had come from Germany and married Emmeline Corcoran, a daughter of James and Mary (Bowen) Corcoran, whose farm surrounded Corcoran Lagoon in Live Oak.

Interestingly, along Spreckels Drive today in the area of Claus Court, there is a distinctive grove of rugged old Cedar-of-Lebanon trees. These were planted as an attraction on the grounds of the Aptos Hotel in the 1870's.

The Santa Cruz Sentinel (6-12-1875) described the Aptos Hotel compound as the "Newport of the Pacific", comparing it to Newport, Rhode Island. It was grand and glorious, to be sure, but it failed financially for a number of reasons. Aptos Village became a rough-and-tumble, booming industrial center when the railroad came in to support massive logging and sawmilling operations in the Aptos and Valencia Creek watersheds .. it became unattractive as a resort community. The competition for tourism along the Central Coast intensified, particularly after the more direct railroad from Los Gatos over and through the mountains was commissioned in 1880. As an attraction, the Aptos Hotel was crowded out by Southern Pacific's fabulous Del Monte Hotel (1881), Camp Capitola the "tent city" (1879), the massive Capitola Hotel (1883), the long-famous Sea Beach Hotel at the Santa Cruz beachfront (1886), and others.

The Aptos Hotel was dismantled very carefully in 1896 to avoid vandalism and to salvage the lumber (particularly the massive hand-hewn redwood supporting timbers) which was to be used in constructing the huge beet sugar refinery complex near Salinas; the town of Spreckels. The nine "honeymoon" cottages at the Aptos Hotel were moved to Spreckels, to become employee residences.

The Spreckels family completed an enormous 2-story ranch home for themselves in the 1870s. From a knoll, it faced the Coast Road (Soquel Drive) diagonally across today's freeway from the Arco Service Station in Rio Del Mar. With its columned verandas all around the first floor and open porches all around the second floor, it was a landmark for 50-years. It burned to the ground in 1929—two lovely old magnolia trees out front and the concrete foundations are all that remain to mark the spot. The ranch buildings (barns, stables, maintenance shops, equipment sheds, etc.) and corrals were located where today's Rio Del Mar interchange extends north from the freeway, in the general area of today's Redwood Village and Pacific Telephone's regional center.

The view from the Spreckels' home was across the Coast Road (Soquel Drive) to Valencia Lagoon and the oak-studded ridge comprising the north section of today's Rio Del Mar. That lagoon, incidentally, was a sizeable body of water before the freeway cut through it in 1948—what is left today is the fenced-off breeding ground for our rare, near-extinct long-toed salamanders. The Spreckels built a 12-ft high wooden fence around 170-acres of that oak-studded ridge to create a park, which they stocked with deer and elk—a private hunting preserve. That fence ran along today's Bonita Drive on the north side of the ridge, and today's Monterey Drive on the south side of the ridge. It zigzagged across the ridge about opposite today's Golf Lodge. Valencia Lagoon was the "water hole" for the deer and the elk. It was from this game reserve that the Deer Park Tavern and Shopping Center were named.

Interestingly, the Spreckels clan built four architecturally similar homes between 1873 and 1888. The first was for Claus and Anna (Mangels) Spreckels, as described above. The second was for John and Emmeline (Corcoran) Mangels on Eay View Court in Rio Del Mar (he was a nephew of Claus and Agnes (Grosse) Mangels; she was a daughter of James Corcoran, for whom Corcoran Lagoon in Live Oak was named)—it was smaller, and was torn down by the Rio Del Mar developers in 1925. The third was for Claus and Anna (Mangels) Spreckels in the Punahou District of Honolulu—it was almost identical to the first; it was partially dismantled and moved in 1915, and burned in 1954. The fourth was for Claus and Anna (Zweig) Mangels in 1888 (he was brother-in-law and business partner of Claus Spreckels; a second marriage for him) a mile up Aptos Creek from the village; it was almost identical to the first and third. The "Mangels' House" is a well preserved historical monument; a popular bed-and-breakfast operation today.

A gentleman named Peter Larsen, a Danish immigrant, was the resident ranch and project manager for Spreckels from the beginning, in 1872. The Larsen's home (provided by the Spreckels) was across the Coast Road (Soquel Drive) from the barn yards; it backed-up to today's Arco Service Station in Rio Del Mar and stood in the middle of today's freeway. The Larsens raised five children in that home—daughter Norma (Mrs. Roy Day—Day Valley fame), a widow, was living with a niece (Mrs. Frank B. Lewis) in Rio in 1982. That home, incidentally, was acquired by George Carroll Humes (Humes Avenue and Humes Court in Rio) in 1924. His sister, Harriett Humes Sweet converted the downstairs to the Deer Park Tea Room, which became the social center of the community and was the forerunner of the now famous Deer Park Tavern, before and after the freeway in 1948.

As an aside, Peter Larsen bought a 100-acre spread from Jose and Augustia (Castro) Arano (of Bay View Hotel fame) for \$3,000 in 1890; it was for his retirement. That parcel faced the Coast Road (Soquel Dr.) across from today's Rancho Del Mar Shopping Center. It ran north to beyond today's Aptos Library, and back as far as Aptos Creek; it had been gifted to Augustia by her parents in 1866. The Larsen's retirement home was built exactly where the Chevron Service Station is today.

Jose Arano never got to the bank with that \$3,000 in 1890. He ran away, abandoning his family and hotel business. He was found 10-years later, living as a hermit in Ventura, and was returned to Aptos. He died in the Bay View Hotel in 1928; age 91.

Aptos (Rio Del Mar) was once a seaport, believe it or not. In 1850 Rafael Castro built a 500-ft wharf near the mouth of Aptos Creek—he shipped hides, cattle, grain and flour (from his Cascade Grist Mill, which stood on today's Creek Drive). The wharf was extended to 900-ft in 1867 to ship cord-wood, an important industrial fuel in those days. And then, Claus Spreckels restructured it and extended it to 1,000-ft in 1880, to accommodate his own large ships (the Oceanic Steamship Company) hauling sugar cane from Hawaii to his San Francisco refinery, and redwood lumber as back-haul from Aptos to Hawaii. In this connection, Spreckels ran a narrow-gauge railroad spur from the lumber yards in Aptos Village to his wharf. A major sea-storm in 1889 wrecked the wharf structure, and it was never rebuilt—the broken pilings can be seen today on occasion at low tide, as can pieces of steel rail, sticking out of the sand.

Claus Spreckels died of pneumonia in his San Francisco mansion the day after Christmas, 1908—he was 80. His wife (Anna Christina) died in that mansion February 15, 1910; she too was 80.

The main-line businesses and properties went to their sons John and Rudolph Spreckels before the death of their father. For this reason, they were specifically excluded as beneficiaries in the Will of Claus Spreckels. The personal property, including the Aptos Ranch, reverted to the San Christina Investment Co. which was managed by and for the widow, sons Claus A. and Rudolph, and daughter Emma C. (Spreckels) Ferris-Hutton.

The San Christina Investment Co. continued to operate the Aptos Ranch almost dutifully throughout WW-I, but permitted the facilities to deteriorate, sadly. Finally, in July, 1922, it sold out completely to Fred A. and (wife) Phoebe F. Somers, investors/developers from Pomona, CA; some 2,390-acres, including improvements, for \$200,000—\$92 per acre.

Sources

- *This article is an excerpt from Rio Del Mar: a Sedate Residential Community, the Depth of its Character, 225 Years of Local History, by Allen Collins, published by the author, May 1995.*
- *Copyright 1995 Allen Collins. Reproduced with the permission of Hester Collins.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.