

Santa Cruz Owes Site to Spud Rush

By Ross Eric Gibson

The clock tower marks the heart of Santa Cruz. But this is hardly an ideal place for a downtown, and came into existence by accident.

The Spanish can't be blamed for its location. These "Flats" were such an inhospitable flood plain that the Spanish never built there after the mission's second year. Instead, the Flats were their hortaliza, or vegetable garden. No Spanish town was built here, and the local Spanish village was Branciforte, 1 1/2 miles east of the mission. Branciforte's plaza was located where Branciforte Elementary School stands today.

When Elihu Anthony came to town in 1847, the only land not owned by the Indians or Spanish was the sloping sides of Mission Hill bluff and the river bank east of Front Street. So Anthony filed a claim for this leftover land, paying \$12 for it and \$3.62 for a filing fee. He built his home on the bluff, and opened a business on the flats, about where the clock tower stands today.

Anthony had no idea this would become the downtown. His goal since he left Indiana was to make sawmill hardware for the booming lumber industry. In Santa Cruz, three sawmills bordered the lower San Lorenzo River, with about a half-dozen others within a five-mile radius.

His original business here was a combination blacksmith shop, general store, post office, and the first foundry in California outside of San Francisco. Anthony also created the town's first subdivision, bordered by Water Street and Front Street (then called Main Street). Beach Hill and nearby West Cliff were the town's next subdivision, considered the most logical location for the town's business center.

When gold was discovered in 1848, most of the adult male population soon left town. Later, having seen only wooden picks used in the gold fields, Anthony made the first iron picks sold to the miners. And noticing that the market for non-perishable food other than beans, Anthony began exporting potatoes and grain.

To do this, Anthony built the county's first wharf and first bridge in 1849. The wharf stood at the foot of Bay Street and the bridge spanned Neary Gulch (where the railroad tracks pass Aladdin's Inn). The bridge formed a gently sloping ramp, so that a loaded wagon could ascend the bluff to the wharf.

Anthony rigged an ingenious elevator for the wharf, which left the cliff at an incline. Two large boxes at either end of a long rope could run in parallel chutes on the wharf. The rope looped around a pulley at the entrance to the wharf. One box was filled at the cliff, and the weight moved it to the bottom of the wharf, at the same time pulling the empty box to the top. The empty box was filled as the full box was unloaded into the ship, and gravity repeated the process.

One Branciforte farmer, Pancho, the nephew of a convict-settler known as Diego, was still growing white mission potatoes on the Flats. He was joined by several others, including a 300-pound Carolinian, Henry Rice, whose potato patch was right on the Lower Plaza (where the old PG&E Building is today).

By 1850, potatoes had reached the high price of 15 cents a pound in San Francisco. To save shipping costs, Anthony chartered the schooner Gen. Morgan with two partners.

In 1851 Judge Blackburn and his brother Daniel started a vast potato farm on the Flats south of Laurel Street. In 1852, the judge sent a four-pound sample of potatoes to the World's Fair in New York, where they won prizes for the "finest potatoes ever known." This was considered the first evidence of California's vast agricultural potential.

When Pancho went to the gold fields to seek his fortune, he was surprised to discover the potatoes he brought as provisions would cause bidding wars among the miners, sometimes selling for an ounce of gold (\$1). Mining potatoes seemed more lucrative than digging for gold. So an avalanche of failed gold miners headed for agricultural areas, including Santa Cruz and the Pajaro Valley.

The spud rush was on. On the San Lorenzo Flats, property owners were leasing land to potato farmers for \$100 an acre. Overnight, a boom town of tent-frame buildings arose around the Lower Plaza. Now a full-time courthouse was needed, so the city purchased Thomas Fallon's saddle shop (on the site of the present mission replica).

To save immigrants a trip to San Francisco or Monterey, J.R. Jarvis built a customs house on Front Street (a portion of which remains as the rear section of Zoccoli's Deli). In March 1853, plans for a public road over the Santa Cruz Mountains were made, then delayed until 1857.

The town's two hotels were filled to overflowing. The Franklin House was built south of the 1850 Santa Cruz House (site of today's VFW Hall). And Henry Rice built the San Lorenzo House as the town's first luxury hotel, so successful potato farmers could move to more luxurious accommodations.

The harvest of 1852 made many people rich. Most reinvested in a second crop, anticipating far greater returns. But in the autumn of 1853, overproduction caused the bottom to drop out of the market. You couldn't give potatoes away. Potatoes were left rotting in the fields, or dumped by the cartload on both sides of the road from Santa Cruz to Watsonville.

The potato farmers were largely a transient population, intending to make a fortune and return in triumph back East. Now many found themselves stranded in Santa Cruz, nearly penniless. They were living in temporary tent-frame structures with wooden floors and wainscot, and canvas walls and roof. Now these were being boarded over for more permanent accommodations. The depression of 1855 made money scarce, and barter became the mode of trade.

This combination of forces left Santa Cruz with an instant town and an instant population. And from the boom days of the spud rush, downtown Santa Cruz came to be where it is today.

Sources

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