

replay

'None Can Compare'

When the lime industry ruled Santa Cruz County

By Geoffrey Dunn

Santa Cruz lime is unquestionably equal to the best in the world. None that has ever been imported here can compare with it.

—*The San Francisco Times, 1868*

When I was a young boy, nearly a half-century ago, my father used to take me into Fall Creek State Park, just outside Felton, for long, cool walks among the bay and redwood trees and occasionally to fish for trout in the creek itself.

I remember quite vividly my first encounter with one of the long-abandoned Fall Creek lime kilns, covered with moss and ferns, and though I had absolutely no knowledge of what they were used for, I had an immediate sensation that the stone and brick-built structures were a link to a time and place far removed from the modern world.

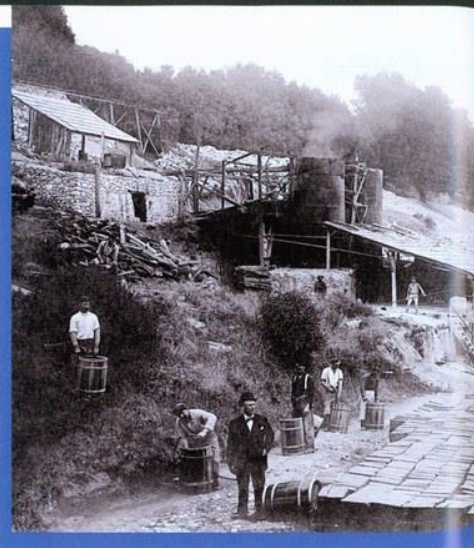
The kilns piqued my curiosity about local history. I wondered who had built them and why. I wondered how they worked and why they had been left abandoned in the silence of the forest.

By the time I was a teenager, I had discovered vestiges of lime kilns at more than a half-dozen sites scattered across the Santa Cruz Mountains, all the way to Davenport and Bonny Doon and up the San Lorenzo Valley.

They seemed to me like the ancient ruins of the Coliseum or the Pyramids, or even the primitive wonders of Stonehenge. They were mysterious and magical — and they provided a window into the wonders and secrets of a distant past.

Legacy from the past

As anyone who has ever made a cursory study of Santa Cruz history knows full well, the industries that fueled the Santa Cruz County economy during the second half of the 19th century were the legendary "Three Ls"—leather, lumber and lime.



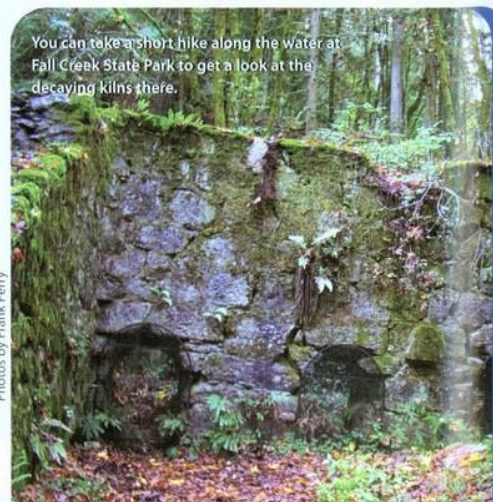
Museum of Art and History/A rare photo of the Homes lime works operating in Felton in June 1908. Now only a few kilns are left as a legacy to a vanished time.

The first two remain rather apparent a century-and-a-half later, but the heritage of lime is a bit more difficult to conjure, not quite so readily traced. We still see cattle grazing on pasturelands throughout the county, while the Santa Cruz Mountains are lined with towering redwoods. In the case of the lime industry, however, the footprints are less obvious, but the remaining legacy is far-reaching and profound.

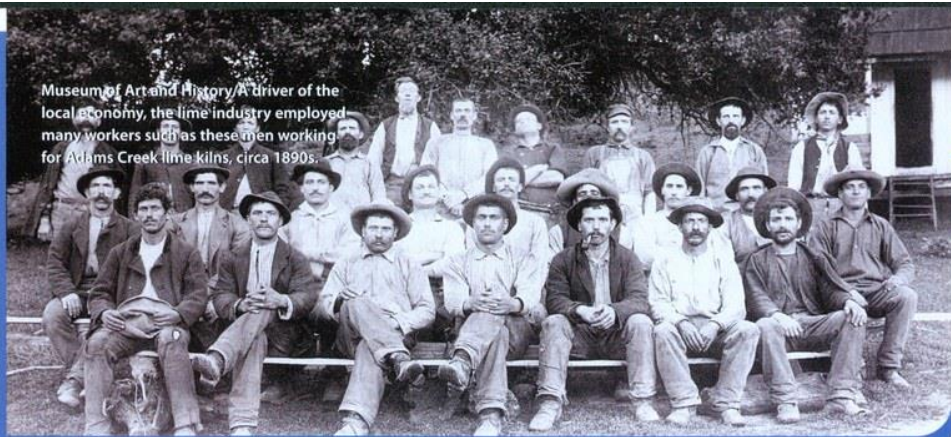
The University of California, for instance, is located on the original site of the Davis and Jordan Lime Works (later purchased by Henry Cowell), and there are physical reminders of what was once California's largest lime facility (kilns, quarries, flumes and associated buildings) scattered across the campus.

Indeed, lime activities can be traced to the earliest days of European settlement in the Monterey Bay region. Deposits of calcium oxide, or lime, were identified as a resource in Santa Cruz County as early as 1769 by Spanish explorers.

You can take a short hike along the water at Fall Creek State Park to get a look at the decaying kilns there.



Photos by Frank Perry



Museum of Art and History A driver of the local economy, the lime industry employed many workers such as these men working for Adams Creek lime kilns, circa 1890s.

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Lime was mined locally at the Santa Cruz Mission for a variety of uses, including the processing of cornmeal, and it was employed in the building of the original mission structure and other nearby edifices.

While Isaac Davis and Albion Jordan have erroneously been given credit for founding the lime industry in Santa Cruz, they certainly put it on the map. Commencing their enterprise at the top of Bay Street in 1853, they spent \$20,000 on expanding a shipping pier on the Santa Cruz waterfront, and another \$60,000 for a new steamship, Santa Cruz, to transport barrels of lime and other local resources

to San Francisco. It proved to be a lucrative enterprise.

Lime was the central ingredient in the building of the West. It was used primarily for construction — brick mortar, plaster and whitewash — in the burgeoning coastal and inland communities of post-Gold Rush California. It was also used in papermaking, tanning hides and processing sugar beets. The local economy was driven by it.

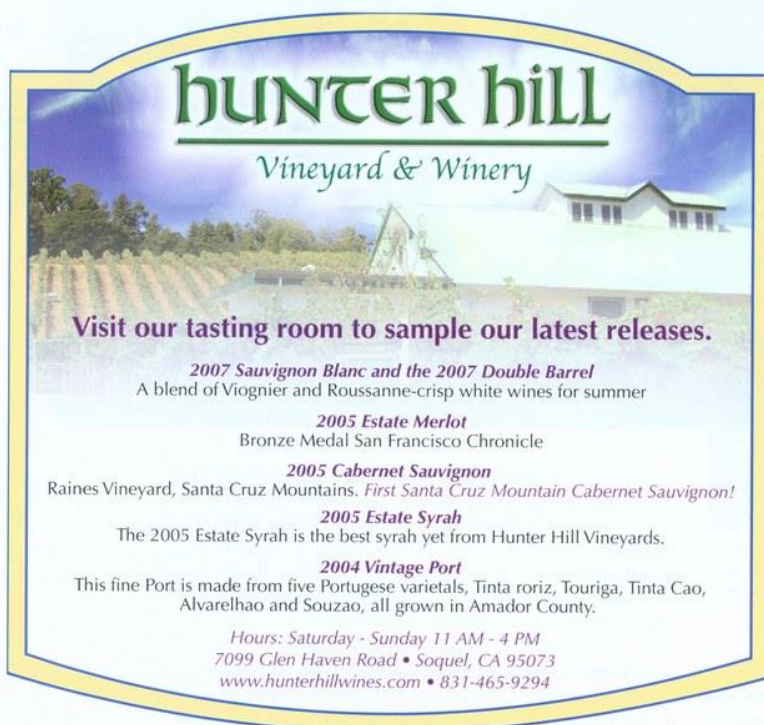
By 1854, according to the delightful and superbly researched local history, "Lime Kiln Legacies," published last year by the Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz lime companies were already producing more than 50,000 barrels annually.

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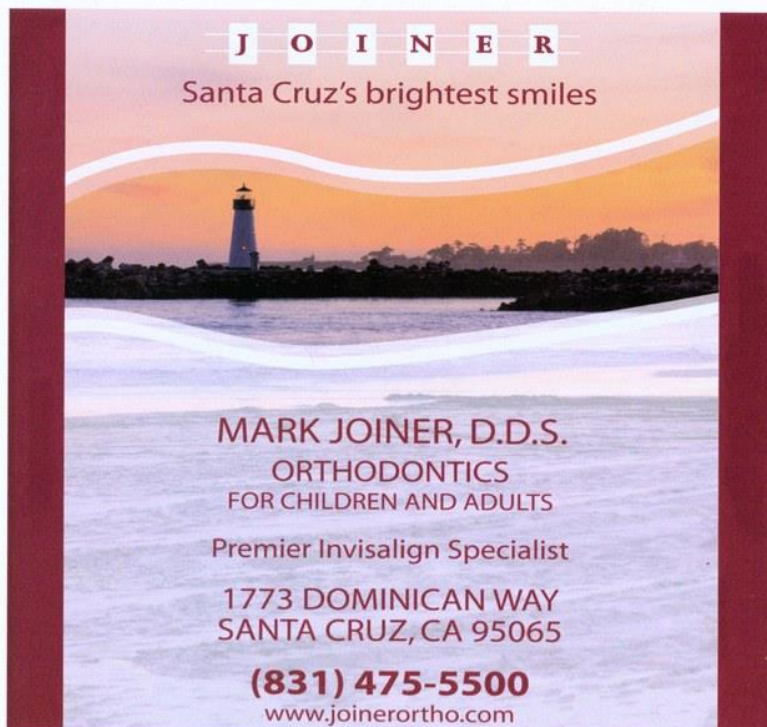
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Beginning of the end

By the beginning of the 20th century, the local lime industry was operating at full throttle. More than two dozen businesses would eventually engage in local lime production, employing hundreds of workers. In 1908, the Holmes Lime Company in Felton produced 108,000 barrels at a profit of 53 cents per barrel.

Well into the 1920s and '30s, the workforce was composed largely of Italian and Portuguese immigrants looking for a foothold in the New World. The work was rugged and often dangerous, especially around the fires in the kilns. Deaths were rare, though serious injuries and severe burns were not uncommon. Workers organized a lime burners union, demanding higher wages and better working conditions.

By the end of World War II, the lime industry sputtered to a halt. The families that ran the last two major lime enterprises in the region—the Cowells and the Holmes families—simply gave up the ghost. Lime was being replaced by Portland cement in the construction industry. Newer and bigger lime production facilities were being developed elsewhere in the U.S. and profits were dwindling.

In the ensuing decades, many of the remaining lime kilns in the county deteriorated, or worse yet, were destroyed by vandals. But in recent decades, the kilns have been revered by historic preservationists, and the history of the county's lime industry is finally getting its due. Local historian Frank Perry, one of the principal authors of "Lime Kiln Legacies," has spearheaded many of these preservation efforts.

Just this past December, the once-thriving lime enterprise on the UCSC campus was added to the National Register of Historic Places. A walking tour exploring more than two dozen aspects of the lime operation is now coordinated by the Friends of the Cowell Lime Works Historic District on campus. As a tour guide compiled by Perry notes, "With a little imagination, one can step back in time." ☺

Geoffrey Dunn, a writer and filmmaker, is the author of "Santa Cruz Is in the Heart." For more information on the lime kilns of Santa Cruz County, go to limekilnlegacies.com.