

Davenport

If Trees Could Talk

Of Whaling, a Smuggled School and Rum Running

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel Staff Writer

A lonely old cypress stands guard over the ramshackle building that once was Agua Puerca Schoolhouse . . .

Many years have gone by since children climbed its steps to leave their coats in the "cloakroom" and settle down to the serious business of the three Rs.

Agua Puerca schoolhouse is a remnant of a ghost town . . . Davenport Landing, early-day whaling center that once had three hotels and a 45-foot long wharf.

The old cypress tree could tell some interesting tales . . . of horse-drawn wagons unloading lumber and lime and tanbark at the wharf where it was loaded onto ships; of Captain John Davenport, who first settled in the cove, and his whaling days . . . of the school itself which was moved in the dark of night, and of the rum-runners of later prohibition days.

Captain Davenport came from Tiverton, R.I., to Monterey, then to Soquel, and finally to the cove which now bears his name. In the 1860s he lived in a frame house on the West side of the arroyo, overlooking the 450-foot long wharf he had constructed at the mouth of Agua Puerca Creek (Dirty Water Creek), according to Mrs. Elio Orlando who has done extensive research on the Davenport area.

Whaling was good in Monterey Bay. The California Gray whale was plentiful and easy to catch. Captain Davenport perfected a method of going after them in a small boat. Other whalers soon settled in Davenport's cove and lumber and lime workers also came there to live. Two hotels (or boarding houses) with 15 rooms each, another with ten rooms, and

a number of cabins and small houses were built.

The hotels were named the Bannister, the Davenport Landing Exchange Hotel and La Stella del Mar. There were two stores, a blacksmith shop and a post office. But no school. And in later years as families moved in, the pressure for a schoolhouse increased.

There was a schoolhouse at Scott's Creek — and very few children to attend it — and one dark Saturday night in 1908, 20 men got their horses together, jacked up the schoolhouse and moved it to Davenport Landing.

When the bewildered teacher arrived the following Monday morning, the schoolhouse was gone and she was told to follow it — to Davenport Landing. The schoolhouse is still there, quite a bit the worse for its years.

In the early 1870s a stage coach ran "up the coast" from Santa Cruz to San Gregorio with Billy Bias driving, according to Mrs. Orlando. In 1874 Nathan Ingalls took over the daily route and extended it to Pescadero and San Mateo. A later driver was Jim Harvey. Jim misjudged the waves and lost part of his stage coach once, at Waddell bluff. The road at the foot of the cliff ran along the beach and was passable only in low tide.

Whaling in the 1970s and 80s was busiest between the months of January and May when the parade of gray monsters came down the coast on their migration to Baja California.

It was said they were attracted to the Davenport area by the rocks on which they scratched parasites from their thick hides, which may be true or not, I do not know. But whales that came close to shore to scratch themselves seldom lived to

enjoy their parasite-free hides. Captain Davenport kept his spy glass handy and when he saw a whale he went into action in a small boat — and he seldom missed. His reputation as a fearless and successful whaler was widespread.

From 1846 to 1875 about 11,000 whales were killed in the Pacific Ocean; each whale provided from 20 to 70 barrels of oil. So lucrative was the whaling business and so easy to capture was the California Gray that it faced extinction. Since 1938 it has been under complete protection through an international agreement.

In 1915 a fire wiped out most buildings at Davenport Landing. The Bannister Hotel remained and it was torn down in 1920. The Stella del Mar was rebuilt along with five cottages, but in 1954 and 1958 fires burned them down too.

It is said that in Prohibition years, the almost deserted cove was a busy place. It didn't pay to be too curious when one heard a motor boat in the middle of the night . . . "rum runners" as they were called locally, were probably delivering the goods. Bottled goods.

In these later years all legitimate activity had moved to the "new" Davenport, where it is today. On January 29, 1961, dedication ceremonies commemorated whaling days in the area and three descendants of Captain Davenport were present to the ceremony.

Today not much remains at Davenport Landing to remind visitors of the busy years when whalers yelled "Thar she blows!" and took off in hot pursuit.

The old schoolhouse that arrived in the dark of night has been empty for many years.



Agua Puerca Schoolhouse as it looks today, 63 years after it was smuggled to Davenport Landing in the middle of one dark night. Back in the 1870's and 80s the Landing was a busy place; today it is all but deserted.

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