

The Days of the Sugar Pier: Aptos Wharf Once Stretched Quarter Mile from Shore

By Mary Bryant

Back in the days when the roads leading into town were dirt and narrow, a series of piers lined the coast. Like roots, these redwood structures connected ranchers, miners and loggers to bigger cities and the world. Some of the wharves remain, like the century-old pier in Capitola. Some don't, like the 1300-foot commercial wharf that once dominated Aptos beach.

Built around the middle of the 19th century, the wharf that stretched from Aptos Creek toward the sea was originally known as Castro's wharf, named after the ranchero owner who constructed the first pier. His landing would be bought by sugar-king Claus Spreckels. From his Aptos wharf, Spreckels' sugar ships would pick up redwood lumber harvested from local mountains for export to Hawaii. By the turn of the century, trains had taken over the job of carrying products to markets, and a series of storms had undercut the pier's pilings.

The Wharf in the Early Years

Don Raphael Castro owned much of Aptos in the mid-1850s. He gained fame convincing Anglos to build businesses on his land. When the lease ended, Castro would assume title to the businesses and the buildings. To entice entrepreneurs to his property, Castro hired a man with the last name of Leonard to build his wharf, according to Capitola Museum director Carolyn Swift.

Castro contracted Gilbert Andersen to operate his 500-foot pier, erected just west of Aptos Creek.

From the docks, men brought flour, grain, fruit, cattle, hides and lumber to ships that delivered cargo along California's coast.

In 1867, Castro leased the wharf to Titus Hale. Hale made a living by cutting oak firewood. According to Aptos Museum's co-director John Hibble, a news story of the time told of some 4000 cords of oak firewood waiting on the wharf for shipment to San Francisco, where city dwellers believed the wood to be some of the best for heating homes.

From Dock to Sugar Pier

Hibble said that the area was growing, as large landowners began harvesting timber in earnest during the early 1860s. The economic boom meant more products had to be transported to market.

Hale expanded the wharf to 1,000 feet. The pier joined with Aptos Wharf Road, the area's first commercial street. The street connected the coast with the town of Aptos.

The town's general store was at the top of Aptos Wharf Road, and still stands today, at 7996 Soquel Drive. The white wood-sided building is the oldest structure in Aptos, according to Hibble.

In 1872, Spreckels purchased about one-third of Castro's holdings. He would later buy out the remainder of Castro's holdings.

Hibble said that four years after Spreckels took title to the wharf, Congress drafted the reciprocity treaty that allowed certain Hawaiian imports to enter the country duty free. Sugar was among these commodities, and Spreckels dominated the sugar market in California, importing sugar from his own plantation in Hawaii.

Spreckels owned the state's only major sugar refining plant in San Francisco, known as Bay Sugar Refining Company.

"He essentially had a monopoly on the refining of Philippine and Hawaiian sugar," Hibble said.

Spreckels' son was put in charge of Spreckels' new shipping company, known as the Oceanic Steamship Company. Captain John Matson operated Spreckels' steamship line. Matson would eventually take over Spreckels' shipping company changing the name to Matson Lines. He would use some of his fortune to build a mansion estate in Woodside named the Filoli House.[1]

The Sugar Pier

Spreckels lived in San Francisco, and opened summer homes throughout the world. Hibble said that judging by the amount of time Spreckels spent living and working in Santa Cruz County, his Aptos estate must have been one of his favorites.

Spreckels helped lobby for a train stop in Aptos, a short buggy ride from his beachside hotel. He stabled and raced his thoroughbred horses at the polo grounds. He kept his deer on the grounds that are now Deer Park center.

Spreckels liked his Aptos home so much that he had a second identical mansion built and shipped in pieces to his property on Hawaii from the Aptos wharf, according to Hibble.

Times changed for Spreckels in 1886, when he fell from grace with the Hawaiian royal court. Cut off from his sugar supplies, Spreckels had to find an alternative product or lose his market monopoly.

His salvation came in the form of new technology. Spreckels was the first to commercially produce sugar from sugar beets. And, he paid area farmers to grow sugar beets to ship to his Watsonville Sugar Refinery.

When in town, Spreckels would entertain, with some guests likely arriving via ship.

Hibble said that not much is known of the imports the ships brought to Aptos. He said that area ranchers and farmers were very resourceful, and probably didn't buy many supplies out of the area.

Hibble said that the only known surviving photo of the wharf is part of the collection at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

The railroad tracks that appear on the wharf were never used for trains, but allowed men and donkeys to pull heavy carts along the tracks.

From the pier looking to shore during the peak of Spreckels reign in Aptos, Hibble said that his livery stable could be seen to the right and the Seacliff cliffs to the left.

The river flows as it did for centuries, before the Rio del Mar Company changed its path in the early part of the 20th century. Hibble said that if you look closely, after a storm has carried away some of the beach sand near Seacliff, a few of the original pilings can still be seen punching up from the surf.

Footnotes

1. The [Filoli website](#) indicates that Filoli was actually built for Mr. and Mrs. William Bowers Bourn, prominent San Franciscans whose chief source of wealth was the Empire Mine, a hard-rock gold mine in Grass Valley, California. The estate was purchased in 1937 by Mr. and Mrs. William P. Roth [nee Lurline Matson, the daughter of Captain William Matson], who owned the Matson Navigation Company. Under the Roths' supervision the property was maintained and the formal garden gained worldwide recognition.

Sources

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