

Historic lime kilns ought to be preserved

By ANTHONY KIRK

lime kilns
ON TUESDAY evening, the Santa Cruz City Council will decide the fate of the historic lime kilns at Pogonip, vestiges of another era hidden on the forested flanks of the hills north of downtown.

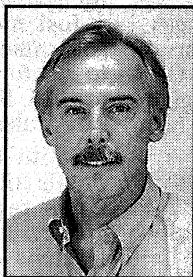
Constructed perhaps as much as a century and a half ago, when California was still a Mexican province, the lime kilns played a vital role not only in the growth and development of Santa Cruz but in the rise of the Golden State. At one time, a quarter of the town's residents found employment in the lime industry, and throughout the 19th century in California, more than half of all the lime — an essential element in the making of mortar, plaster, and whitewash — came from kilns in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The tradition of calcining, or burning, limestone in California dates back to about 1790, when Spanish missionaries constructed the first rude kilns in this distant outpost of the empire. Lime making as a commercial venture did not emerge until American rule, however, and the industry first flourished in the frenzied days of the Gold Rush. In 1850 the rapid rise of brick construction in the instant city of San Francisco created an unprecedented demand for mortar.

Several years earlier, enterprising Yankees had constructed stone kilns outside of Santa Cruz, where huge deposits of high-grade limestone lay buried; and during the first year of statehood, they produced 90 percent of the lime shipped in California.

Over the following decades, the lime industry expanded enormously in Santa Cruz, and for the rest of the century it was a leading industry in the region, rivaling or even surpassing logging in importance. Towering redwoods from ancient forests fell to the ax and were hauled by ox teams over skid roads to the dozen or so kilns scattered through the mountains. In preparation for each "burn," skilled masons called archers prepared a grate of low-grade limestone in a kiln, on which the high-quality rock was dumped from above.

For four days following ignition, an



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' Kilns are symbols of the past. '

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enormous fire roared in the kiln, burning white hot, as laborers, working 12-hour shifts, stoked the flames with 8-foot lengths of split redwood. When the ashes cooled, the pure lime was packed in barrels and carted away to be mixed with sand and water to produce the mortar and cement that built the cities and towns of 19th-century California.

Today, long after the last fires died out, the Pogonip lime kilns still tower above the old Rincon Road that winds through the former Cowell Ranch. Over the years, though, second-growth redwoods have been slowly reclaiming the site, their roots and trunks and limbs weakening the structural integrity of the kilns' massive stone walls and — unless swift action is taken — ultimately sealing their fate.

In recognition of the historic importance of the Pogonip lime kilns and in response to the mandate of the Santa Cruz General Plan, the city's Parks and Recreation Department has proposed the removal of nine second-growth trees in order to begin stabilization of these structures. After stabilization is accomplished, the city will be able to restore the kilns, which are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Once preserved, with an accompanying interpretive display, they would contribute greatly to a better understanding of the history of Santa Cruz, enhancing the attraction of Pogonip to children and adults alike.

It was a belief in the historic value of the lime kilns — a commitment to saving the silent stone legacy of a largely forgot-