

The whaling station in Moss Landing was the Granddaddy of all Odor Blasters.

Sandy Lydon collection

Nose knows odors of yesteryears

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I MISS THE smell of burning garbage. Now, don't misunderstand. I don't long for the odor of a perpetually-burning dump, nor do I like it particularly. I miss burning garbage the same way I miss a wart that falls off or the space left by a broken tooth.

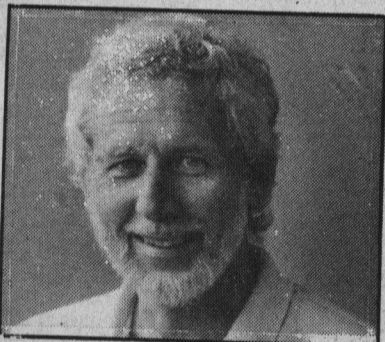
I drove past a good old-fashioned burning dump on a recent trip to Baja California and was instantly transported back 30 years to the time when you knew where you were by how things smelled. That whiff propelled me back to the ever-burning Santa Cruz city dump up the coast, and the real nose-buster dump fire upwind of the Bayshore Freeway near Candlestick Park. (They used to call it Candlestink Park, you know.)

(The environmentally-correct word "landfill" does not have the same ring as "dump." As far as I'm concerned, I will always be taking a run to the dump.)

In the old days, every community around here had its Signature Odor. You could be blindfolded and still know where you were. Monterey, for example, was blessed with the odor of the fish canneries along Cannery Row, and since most of Monterey's low-rent district was to the east and downwind, there were few complaints. The only high-toned folks subjected to the canneries odors were the guests of the Del Monte Hotel, and the hotel tried to mask the odor with huge beds of odor-blasting flowers. When the wind shifted, however, you could hear the howls of Pacific Grove residents all the way to Santa Cruz.

In the 1890s, Watsonville's dominant odor came from Claus Spreckels' sugar factory located upwind on Walker Street. Sugar beet refineries have a heavy, oppressive, abrasive, and not-so-sweet odor. (You get a taste of

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

1890s Watsonville when driving past the Spreckels sugar factory between Tracy and Manteca.) When Spreckels moved the sugar factory to the Salinas Valley in 1898, he built it beyond and downwind from Salinas, leaving places like Chualar enveloped in a perpetual plume of beet odor. Since most of the folks living in and around Chualar worked in the sugar beets, nobody complained.

Until recently, the smell of money could neutralize obnoxious economic odors. Residents of Monterey and Watsonville grew so accustomed to their industrial odors that a visitor who inquired, "What's that smell?" was greeted by the question, "What smell?" The sound of ringing cash registers may also have something to do with it.

The Granddaddy of all Odor Blasters was the whaling station at Moss Landing, which operated from 1919 to 1925. Odor aficionados say that the smell of boiling whale blubber is enough to bring the stoutest of smellers to their knees. Visitors to the Moss Landing plant would often just stand there on the sand beside the plant and vomit. A southeast

wind could bring a blizzard of angry telephone calls from residents of Aptos and Capitola. Guys who worked at the whaling factory could shower, douse themselves with cologne, put on clean clothes and still be greeted by strangers who would ask, "How are things out at the whaling factory?"

The Good Old Days must have really stunk to high heaven. Trash was not collected and organic items were just left to rot where they fell. The river bottoms filled up with the carcasses of dead horses and cattle awaiting the annual cleansing of winter floods. Mix those odors in with outhouses, slaughterhouses, rendering plants, the custom of bathing once a month, and mouths filled with bad teeth, and you've got a full dance card for anybody's nose.

I grew up next door to one of Hollister's tomato canneries. It was like living in a cloud of tomato spray and to this day, the smell of cooking tomatoes transports me back to autumn, streets ankle-deep with sycamore leaves (remember the smell of burning leaves?), and high school. (I also cannot eat cooked or canned tomatoes in any form.)

High school had its own panoply of odors: the gym locker room, the smell in the main building left by the treated sawdust that the custodians used to use, the clusters of peppercorns on the trees behind the football stadium, and the smell of ditto fluid on the algebra exams.

Not too long ago you could get a whiff of Santa Cruz Mountain industrialism driving past Scarborough Lumber's sawdust burner just west of Highway 17. And let's not forget the mushroom plant at Soquel, with the wonderful lady in the retail store who would sell you mushrooms as big as cantaloupes. Or the vinegar odor from the Santa Cruz Fruit

company just upwind. Or the fresh-baked-bread odor coming out of Maddock's bakery in Soquel.

So, what happened to all the odors? In some instances, the industries are long gone, while in others, our air pollution efforts have worked so well that our noses are no longer good for much of anything. The air is cleaner and healthier, but it sure is BORING. Thankfully there are still a few signature municipal odors around: Gilroy (the garlic odor from the Gilroy Foods plant), Watsonville (vinegar smells down along Riverside, and the new sewer plant out off Beach Road), Salinas (the Nestle chocolate factory and the Schilling spice plant along Highway 101), and San Ardo (the oil wells and refractories). And there's a field of flowers just east of Highway 1 in northern Monterey County which, at night when there's an offshore wind, can knock you and your car off the road.

(I'm hard-pressed to award a contemporary signature odor to Santa Cruz, but some possibilities might be the spicy smell of cooking Szechwan food, the smell of sea lion offal out on West Cliff, or the spicy Lipton odors on the West side.)

Prevailing breezes have so little character these days that my desperate nose is relegated to matching perfumes and colognes with the magazine in which I first smelled them. I do informal olfactory literary surveys as I walk down the street — there goes an Esquire. A Vogue. A Playboy.

But my nostrils really get excited when I pass a big, juicy, dairy, or a newly-cut alfalfa field. Or a burning dump.

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