

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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Our Coastline will Change—That’s for certain



When Charles Hall originally bought property along the west side of Santa Cruz, it included the area now occupied by Natural Bridges State Beach and included three natural arches.

If there is one thing that we can all agree on (and there are probably many things we could agree on), it would be that the coastline is never the same from one day to the next. It doesn't take more than two walks along any beach, or along West Cliff or East Cliff, to recognize that where and how the waves are breaking, or the beach itself, is never exactly the same. Trust me, you can count on it. I think this is one of the things that make the coast interesting and that draw us back, day after day, year after year.

It was initially a collection of old photographs of the Santa Cruz coastline from the late 1800s and the early 1900s that led to a book we did several years ago (“The Santa Cruz Coast- Then and Now”). We tried to find the exact location where those early photographers stood in order to take modern pictures and capture a century or more of change. In some cases, we couldn't stand in the place where the photographer stood a hundred years ago because the spot was gone.

There are places along the Santa Cruz coast that have undergone some remarkable and easily recognizable changes over a hundred years, and others that have changed surprisingly little. It's a constant battle between the energy of the waves and the strength and weakness of the rocks, and the waves eventually win.

Natural Bridges is a good example of the first, lots of change. Even its name keeps changing. It was originally known as Moore's Beach, then Hall's Beach and later Swanton Beach, before becoming Natural Bridges.

Why Moore's Beach? Eli Moore arrived in Santa Cruz from Missouri in 1847 with his wife and five children. He bought a ranch that extended from Empire Grade to the coast and through which Moore Creek flows. The creek passes through what is now Antonelli Pond, but which was then known as Moore Creek Lake, and then on to "Moore's Beach" where the creek entered the ocean. I don't think anyone really knows whether Eli Moore named all of these features after himself, or whether they simply came into common use because he was the landowner. Only Moore Creek has held up over the years, however.

When Richard Harrison Hall came from Vermont to Santa Cruz in 1853 he bought 300 acres, including the old Natural Bridges Dairy, out on what was then called the Cliff Road (the Moore property?). The deed included "three natural bridges" and the beach became known as Hall's Beach.

One of the area's early entrepreneurs and developers, Fred Swanton, formed the Swanton Investment Company in 1908 to develop a subdivision along West Cliff Drive known as Swanton Beach Park. With the hope of luring buyers from the sweltering heat of the Central Valley, he named the streets after cities in the Valley (Modesto, Chico, Auburn, Sacramento, Merced and Coalinga). The street names didn't seem to matter, however. When people realized that this area was often windy and cold, they lost interest and the development ultimately failed. As recently as 1970, nearly all of the lots along Auburn, Chico and Swanton Boulevard were still empty. In 1933, Swanton deeded 54 acres of the property, known at the time as Swanton Beach or Swanton Beach Park to the state.

The North Pacific waves have taken their toll on the cliff here over the years, however, with one bridge collapsing around 1905, and a second failing in the storms of 1980, leaving us today with Natural Bridge State Beach. In time, the last bridge will also fail.

But the coastline doesn't change uniformly, even over short distances. Two-thousand feet west of Natural Bridges, directly in front of the Seymour Center at Long Marine Lab, we have good evidence that the cliff hasn't retreated a foot in 87 years. On October 1, 1924, the La Feliz, a vessel headed towards San Francisco from Monterey with a cargo of canned sardines, ended up on a rocky ledge below

the cliffs. Local residents helped to rescue the crew. The mast was removed, leaned against the cliff, and used with a block and tackle to recover the cargo from the ship.

Remains of the ship's drive shaft can still be seen at a low tide on the beach below the cliffs.

But the most surprising part of the story is that mast is still leaning up against the cliff, 87 years later. The resistant mudstone platform that the La Feliz was grounded on has acted as a natural breakwater and protected the cliffs and the mast from heavy wave attack.

Thirteen years ago I stood in front of the California Coastal Commission, asking for a permit so that we could build the Seymour Center. The chair of the Commission at that time, Sara Wan, said to me "I don't want you coming back here in 30 or 40 years asking for a permit for a seawall to protect your building". I told her the cliff hadn't eroded a foot in 75 years and I promised her that I wouldn't be coming back in for a seawall permit.

On one of our beautiful fall days, bike, walk or drive out to the Seymour Center and you can still see the mast of the La Feliz leaning up against the cliff. While it may look at first glance like a telephone pole, it is the mast of that shipwreck from 1924, still holding on.