

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

**#95 December 17, 2011**

**A 1906 View of the Santa Cruz waterfront**



*George Lawrence photographed the Santa Cruz city coastline in 1906 from a set of kites.*

The first aerial view of the Santa Cruz coast was captured by George Lawrence in 1906 from a camera carried aloft by a system of kites. This rarely seen panoramic photograph covers the entire city and shoreline from Cowells Beach to nearly Pleasure Point and provides a remarkable early record and unique perspective from a century ago.

Lawrence was born in Illinois right after the Civil War. He first worked in a buggy shop where he invented a way to attach iron rims to wooden wheels. In 1891 he opened a photography studio in Chicago where he began to channel his creative energies. He developed what was known as flashlight photography, which was used until flashbulbs were invented many years later.

He quickly became an innovator in the expanding field of photography and developed the slogan: The Hitherto Impossible in Photography is Our Specialty. In 1900 he built a massive camera weighing 1400 pounds in order to take a photograph of a large locomotive for the Paris Exposition of 1900, which won “The Grand Prize of the World”. Probably not too many people can claim that award.

Soon after the turn of the century, George Lawrence became intrigued with the idea of taking photographs from an aerial perspective. Initially he used ladders and high towers but these were pretty limiting and a bit dangerous. Airplanes were still in their infancy, however, and the Wright brothers' first successful flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, didn't happen until 1903.

In order to get the elevated views he wanted, George devised another approach, using a hot air balloon. In 1901 he began shooting aerial photographs from a flimsy cage attached to a tethered balloon. Over the next several years he took a large number of photographs of cities across the country, conventions, sporting events and even western wilderness areas.

But in 1901, while 200 feet above Chicago, the cage with Lawrence in it broke loose from the balloon. Fortunately, telephone wires broke his fall and he landed unharmed. Some months later he fell a second time. At this point he decided that maybe he ought to figure out a safer way to take photographs from the air.

So George began to develop a system of kites to carry bigger and bigger cameras. He used a large plumb bob or weight to keep the kites from spinning around, and used an electric current through the kite's main tether to trip the shutter. In order to get the greatest panoramic view, he developed cameras with a lens that could swing in an arc on a semi-circular track.

Perhaps his best-known photograph is a panoramic view of San Francisco taken in May 1906, just a few weeks after the devastating San Francisco earthquake and fire. With considerable effort he was able to coax his array of kites up to an altitude of 2000 feet to capture virtually the entire city, including the Golden Gate, on a single 17-by-48 inch piece of film.

In that same year, George Lawrence traveled to Santa Cruz and launched his kites from the West Cliff Drive area, not far from the lighthouse, and captured the details of the city and the coastline.

High-resolution digital copies of Lawrence's 1906 aerial photographs of San Francisco and Santa Cruz can be downloaded from the following Library of Congress web-site: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/d?pan:20:./temp/~ammem\\_uS6V](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/d?pan:20:./temp/~ammem_uS6V): The Santa Cruz image is No. 53, and San Francisco is No. 110. You can click on the image to download high-resolution copies. And if you happen to have a large format printer in your home office,

printing them at their original scale, 48 inches across, produces a great wall covering or conversation piece.

There were three wharves at that time, all gone or replaced now. The one in the foreground is the Cowell wharf, which was at a higher elevation and left the cliffs at the end of Bay Street, right between where the Dream Inn and the Sea and Sand stand today. Neary's Lagoon shows up as a large swampy area.

The second largest house built in Santa Cruz up until that time, the Sedgewick Lynch house, is visible on the terrace between the two wharves, just inland from West Cliff. It was constructed at a cost of \$12,000 at the time and has recently been renovated as The West Cliff Inn, right across the street from the Dream Inn. There are a few other recognizable structures but it's a very different waterfront today. More to come in two weeks.