

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

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**Sand Hill Bluff**



*Sand Hill Bluff (from California Coastal Records Project)*

Sand Hill Bluff, 5 miles north of the city limits, is a unique geographic feature, labeled on the USGS topographic map of the North Coast, but probably missed by most travelers passing by on Highway 1. It's distinct in being one of the only areas along the coast north of Santa Cruz where there is any relief on top of the normally flat marine terrace.

Sand Hill Bluff was first called out in the 1889 Pacific Coast Pilot as a location along the shoreline where a large accumulation of white sand could be seen from ships offshore rising above the tan colored mudstone cliffs that make up the coastline.

It has retained this name to the present, although much of the surface of the white sand is now covered with vegetation. The area is also a kitchen midden, as evidenced by the fragments of abalone shell and other marine invertebrates left behind by Native Americans who occupied the area several thousand years ago and harvested shellfish from the intertidal zone. The area is now fenced and protected although is surrounded by a boardwalk for hikers.

Why a sand pile sitting on top of the terrace at this particular location? Interestingly, the pile of sand is actually an old dune, but one that is no longer connected to its original source of beach sand.

In order to build a large sand dune, we need an ample supply of beach sand, a wide beach so the sand can dry out between tidal cycles, a dominant onshore wind, and then an area of low relief directly inland from the beach where the sand can accumulate.

Today, the old dune is separated from the shoreline below by a 60-foot high vertical cliff. This lack of connection indicates a earlier condition when sea level was tens of feet lower than today and the shoreline was thousands of feet farther offshore. The seacliff was very low or non-existent at that time, perhaps like the north shore of Año Nuevo Point today, where sand could be blown inland to form dunes. The dunes were cut off as sea level rose and the shoreline migrated landward, with waves gradually eroding a sea cliff into the flank of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Immediately inland from Sand Hill Bluff is the old community of Majors, a small settlement of homes along a short section of the Old Coast Road on the ocean side of Highway 1 between Majors and Laguna creeks. Majors was a former stop on the Davenport to Santa Cruz section of the Southern Pacific Railroad, formerly known as Enright.

So why Enright? Well, we have to go back to the middle of the 1800s and the arrival of James Enright, a native of Ireland, who crossed the plains in 1846 and arrived in Santa Cruz not long afterwards. James was known as one of the most prominent dairymen of early Santa Cruz County and built a ranch of a thousand acres along this stretch of coastline, which was known for its neatness and thrift.

Enright went on to serve on the County Board of Supervisors and was also one of the organizers of the Santa Cruz Oil Company, which was known for their efforts to extract oil from the asphaltic sandstone that underlies the terraces between Majors and Laguna creeks.

While some modest amount of oil was pumped out through heating the rocks at depth, it wasn't a profitable venture. James and his son Joseph Enright, also developed what was likely the first asphalt mine in the area on the family ranch, known as the Enright Mine. Between 1888 and 1914, an estimated 614,000 tons of

asphaltic paving material, worth about \$2.3 million, was extracted from the north coast. Production was intermittent after the 1920s, with the last of the quarries ceasing operations in the 1940s.