

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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The Early Salt Mines of Monterey Bay

Salt was as valuable a commodity in early California two centuries ago as it was throughout the rest of the world. The earliest reports of harvesting salt in the Monterey Bay region come from documents translated from Spanish, which described salt precipitated out in lagoons behind the dunes in the area near today's city of Marina. The commander of the Presidio in Monterey, one Pedro Fages, described the salt harvesting process in 1773, almost 250 years ago.

“... Mules are used for hauling the carts... They transport salt from the salt beds located to the northeast about three leagues away (about 8 miles from the presidio) over good land which the carts can negotiate. This year I ordered about two hundred loads of salt to be dug up.... Lest the rain deteriorate it, I intend to build a house with a good roof in which to store it. The salt marshes are located in estuaries which are about nine in number and which, each year in the months of June, July, August, and September, are filled with very good salt that looks like stone. If this were sought each year, one could obtain hundreds of loads.”

Maria Antonia Rodrigues, an early resident of the area, recalled in 1874 that *“I remember when I was a little girl, Governor Sola (who was governor from 1815-1822, during the period when Monterey was the capital of Baja and Alta California) sent soldiers out to the two small lagoons twelve miles from Monterey (which would be the location of the Salinas River)... the salt in the lagoons was beginning to set, and the soldiers had orders to make sure that nobody touched the lagoons until the salt was hard and ready to dry out... they would then put the salt in leather bags and transport it to Monterey. There it would be stored and accounted for as belonging to the royal treasury, which had a monopoly on salt. Nobody was allowed to collect salt in the vicinity of Monterey, even though some smugglers who were working for the Senores Ortega collected several fanegas of salt (about two cubic feet) in Jose Armenta's field. They were caught by surprise, placed in jail, and charged with stealing from the royal treasury...”*

Salt clearly had great value in those days and the governor in charge seemed to have a monopoly. Most of the salt was used for curing or preserving beef and hides.

Change was underway, however, and in 1822 Mexico gained its independence from Spain and leadership changes took place in California. In 1833, an interesting event took place, when the low land along the Salinas River mouth that contained the salt ponds was eventually granted to a woman who was originally a Carmel Mission Indian named Cristina Delgado. At the time this land was known as the Rancho Rincon de las Salinas or the “corner of the salt ponds” and covered 2,200 acres.

There was political approval needed from Governor Figueroa, but the records showed that she had improved the land, built a house and small mill and provided salt to the local population. This land development was in accordance with the reigning Mexican liberal notions of economic progress and Cristina was able to develop the political support necessary to secure and work a rancho.

Although she had no children of her own, Cristina Salgado raised four orphans, one of whom was a San Carlos (Carmel Mission) Indian boy, Vicente Guajox, who it is believed helped her to run the rancho. She ran the mill, now had two houses, grazed 70 head of cattle, twenty-five to thirty mares, and also cultivated land. She was clearly a hard working, industrious and capable woman. The legal system and property ownership underwent changes when the United States annexed California, and in 1881 the Rancho Rincon de las Salinas was patented (apparently sold) to Rafael Estrada.

In my next column we will head north to Elkhorn Slough where two Portuguese brothers, part of the Vierra family, established the Monterey Salt Works.

I am grateful for much of the information in this article that was gathered by Andrea Woolfolk, the Stewardship Director at the Elkhorn Slough Reserve, who has researched and collected much of the local history.