

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 Monterey Bay Salt Company



The Monterey Bay Salt Works about 1920

While today we can just head down to our favorite market and pick up a container of “sea salt” without thinking about where it came from, this wasn’t the case 200 years ago. Harvesting salt was an important business here in the early 1800s. In the area, evaporation of seawater from a series of lagoons along the southern Monterey Bay shoreline produced salt that instantly became the property of the local governor.

Salt harvesting moved to the north in the latter part of the 19th century, however, and the *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel* of November 17, 1883 described “a natural salt factory near the mouth of Elkhorn Slough on the ranch of Jas. A. Norris. The

higher tides filled a large depression in the tidelands with seawater, and in the time between the high tides, enough evaporation had taken place that salt was deposited.”

Farmers in the area even made use of the salt for salting hay and the Sentinel story offered, “the opportunity existed for the manufacture of salt on quite an extensive scale at comparatively small expense”.

A headline in the February 8, 1921 Santa Cruz Evening News read, “Monterey Bay Salt Beds are Paying”.

"The tidewaters of Monterey Bay are now making it possible to manufacture salt on the marsh lands at Moss Landing, where the Monterey Bay Salt Company has a plant. The business was established a few years ago by D.C. Vierra and E.C. Vierra, and has been developed by them so that they are making shipments all over the state. The salt is made from the tide waters that flow in and out of the Elkhorn Slough, and through the enterprise and industry of these two brothers, the business has expanded into one of the most important manufacturing enterprises on Monterey Bay. The Vierra brothers have established a reputation for fair dealing that has made their brand of sale in great demand."

The Vierra brothers diked parts of the slough off in 1916, creating ponds where the water would evaporate, leaving the salt behind where it could be collected. David and Ed, along with two other brothers, Joseph and Albert, built a windmill out of junk parts from automobiles that pumped seawater from one evaporation pond to another as the salt became more concentrated. Their ponds covered 5,000 acres and 13 men could produce about 20 tons of salt per day. Eighty percent of the salt was used as a preservative in the local fish canneries, which survived until the mid-1950s. The rest was shipped by rail and boat as far as San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara where it was used in water softeners and in ice cream plants.

“David C. Vierra (one of the brothers) was instantly killed at the salt works at Moss Landing, August 6, 1924, when he was caught in the machinery. He was about forty-three years of age, a bachelor, and was known and respected as an industrious, progressive, and very capable resident of that place”.

The Vierra family has a long history in the Moss Landing area that began with Cato Joseph Vierra, who was born in the Azores in 1835. He married Maria De Rosario De Freitas and had fourteen children on their property that is now, roughly, the Moss Landing area. Edward and David, who started the Monterey Bay

Salt Works, were two of their sons, and there are a number of descendants who still live in the area.

Cato Vierra learned the construction trade as a ship carpenter in his native Azores Islands. In 1867 he migrated and settled in the Elkhorn Slough area and joined Captain Charlie Moss's seaport venture. He built the first pier at what was to become Moss Landing, and which because of the pier, became a major shipping port for grain, potatoes and beans from the Pajaro and Salinas valleys. Cato also operated a ferry to get people and their goods across the entrance to Elkhorn Slough, and then in the early 1870s he constructed a toll bridge to replace the ferry.

The Vierra family continued to run the salt business until 1957. Salt production at the slough was taken over by others and operations continued into the late 1970s. Until the early 1980s the ponds were used to raise brine shrimp for the home aquarium trade, but were also used for waterfowl hunting. In 1985, a century after salt production began, the Fish and Game Commission designated the entire property as a wildlife area.