Our Ocean Backyard

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Wharves have come and gone

The Monterey Bay region historically had a wealth of natural resources that drew immigrants to the area (redwood for lumber, limestone/marble for making cement, as well as sardines and other fin fish and shellfish from the waters of the bay). The early settlers soon realized the potential for productive farmland as well, and over time cultivated the rich soils for a wide range of crops, from potatoes early on, to apples, berries, lettuce, sprouts, artichokes, and more. While the railroad served as an early vehicle for transporting the produce to markets throughout California and beyond, ships were soon seen as another means of transportation.

Access to ships required piers, however, and the region has a long history of construction and subsequent destruction of all manner of piers. Santa Cruz has the record for more wharves than any other site around the bay’s margins. Five different wharves were built over the years in this corner of the bay, beginning in 1857, 166 years ago now. The inventory includes the Cowell Wharf, Gharky Wharf, Railroad Wharf, Pleasure Pier, and the Municipal Wharf. For a short period of time there was also a Cross Wharf connecting the Gharky and Railroad Wharves with a rail line.

Built in 1914, only the Municipal Wharf remains. And although sources as reliable as Wikipedia report that “it is the longest pier on the West Coast of the United States”, it turns out that this isn’t true. So who has a longer pier? It’s in Avila Beach, where Highway 101 hits the coast just south of San Luis Obispo. This area has a history of piers extending back to 1868 when John Harford built Harford Pier (now Port San Luis) for exporting that county’s products. The first pier was only 540 feet long and was soon connected to a narrow-gauge railroad. This pier was then extended 1400 feet further into deeper water in the late 1870s.

Like some of Monterey Bay’s piers, the Harford pier was repeatedly damaged during storms and subsequently reconstructed. Union Oil of California took ownership of the pier and extended and rebuilt it to ship San Joaquin Valley oil via a 200-mile-long pipeline. When no longer needed in 2001, it was donated to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo to use for marine research and education. It’s 3,168 feet long, however, so our Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf has to be content with being number two at 2,745 feet long. We also have Woodies on the Wharf. Our wharf has been damaged over the years during severe winter storms, and pilings and decking is replaced from time to time, but it’s done well now for over a century.

A 2,600-foot-long pier was constructed at Davenport in the late 1930s in order to transport cement by sea from the plant. Wave damage to the pier during construction, however, led the engineers to turn the outer end of the pier more northerly into the swell to reduce wave impact. The pier had two 12-inch diameter pipes for loading dry cement as well as 3-inch line for water and a 6-inch line for fuel oil. The SS Santa Cruz Cement was in service for a little over 15 years until conditions were deemed too dangerous to safely tie up and load the ship. Wave impact over the subsequent years has destroyed all but three of the innermost concrete footings.

A pier at Capitola was originally constructed in 1857 by Frederick Hihn to ship lumber and produce. While initially only 450 feet long and referred to as Soquel Landing, in 1860 it was extended to 1200 feet to accommodate larger ships. In 1865, large waves tore off about 500 feet of the pier. This was a pattern to be repeated multiple times in the subsequent years. One of the most publicized occurred in the winter of 1913 when the entire middle section of the pier was ripped out, stranding a local fisherman at the outer end. He survived. Damage to the pier was to occur during major storms of 1978, 1983 and 1985. As was widely reported, the January 2023 high tides and massive waves again tore out a middle section of the pier. Capitola is now evaluating the next steps for reconstruction.

Not to be outdone, Aptos also had its own wharf, actually three different progressively longer extensions of the original wharf. The first, referred to as Aptos Landing, was built by Rafael Castro, the owner of the huge 6,000-acre Rancho Aptos, in the 1850s. The initial rendition of the wharf was only about 500 feet long and was used to ship redwood lumber, oak firewood, hides and even flour. It was leased by several others and

was repaired and enlarged in 1867 when 500 more feet were added, pushing it farther into the bay.

Claus Spreckels, the Hawaiian sugar king, played a major role in the development of Aptos. He had bought most of Rancho Aptos from Rafael Castro in 1872 and wanted to ship redwood lumber from the area for his developments in Hawai’i. He repaired the wharf and extended it to 1,300 feet in about 1880. As Spreckels’ business dealings in Hawai’i were terminated, the pier at Aptos Landing was neglected and began to deteriorate. By 1889 it had shrunk to about 600 feet and by 1900 it had mostly collapsed. On a low winter tide, you can still occasionally see stubs of the remaining pilings emerging from the sand.

Two weeks ago I had written about the US Navy submarine that was stranded on the shoreline in October 1912 where Palm Beach State Park is today, due west of Watsonville. Back in 1881, Charles Ford leased the area where the Pajaro River enters the bay, known at the time as Camp Goodall. Ford built a hotel and some cottages at the site, which was the beginning of even grander plans. Two promoters in 1903, W.J. Rogers and H.H. Main, decided to make this area an important port for shipping. They were joined by some Watsonville investors and formed the Watsonville Transportation Company.

With much fanfare a 1,300-foot-long pier was completed in 1903 which was connected to an electric rail line running down Beach Road from Watsonville to Camp Goodall and that carried passengers in enclosed cars and freight on flat cars. A major development was planned on the shoreline including a dance hall, hotel and baths, and an area to be divided into town lots for sale.

The next year delivered bad news, however. In November 1904, heavy seas and strong winds destroyed 200 feet of the new wharf, leading Pajaro Valley farmers to ship their produce by the Southern Pacific Railroad. While the wharf was repaired with new redwood pilings, it was soon discovered that Teredo worms, also known as termites of the sea, had infested and weakened the remaining pilings. On March 13-14, 2005, Five-hundred more feet of the Watsonville Transportation Company’s wharf were swept away along with a pile driver. Waves from the southwest carried pilings from the wharf all the way north to Leonard’s Station (just north of present day La Selva Beach). The company went bankrupt in 1905 as another of the bay’s wharves succumbed to nature’s forces.

But wait, there is more to the saga at Palm Beach. Fueled by optimism, the Watsonville Transportation Company was reorganized as the Watsonville Railway and Navigation Company in 1911. The original wharf site which had been named Port Rogers, after W.J. Rogers, an early promoter of the electric rail connection to the coast, was rebranded as Port Watsonville. A new 1700-foot wharf was built in the same location and it was here where the submarine was tied up that floundered in October 1912. Railroad cars were brought back online, and passenger and freight transit was resumed to the port, briefly.

A newspaper account of this new development from the San Francisco Call from May 5, 1911, stated: “The wharf will be built of concrete and creosote and the waves may hammer against the piers until eternity before the wharf could collapse.” A year later, however, in 1912, a storm destroyed 160 feet of the rebuilt wharf and operations of the new company ceased in October 1913. The last remains of the 2nd Watsonville wharf were gone by 1917.

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