Monterey Bay has a geologic history that goes back at least 100 million years, give or take a few million. The human occupancy, however, is considerably shorter. The oldest human remains discovered to date around Monterey Bay are burials from the Harkins Slough area near Watsonville dated at about 7,000 years old. Additional remains discovered nearby indicate later occupancy of the site about 4,500 years ago.

The Spanish began building missions in the area as they marched north in the late 1700s, the closest being in Carmel and Santa Cruz. They essentially took the land from the Ohlone Indians and began running cattle over the surrounding hills.

American settlers arrived in the area in the early 1800s and began farming. Settlements were by this time well established at both ends of the bay, in Santa Cruz and on the Monterey Peninsula, but there wasn’t much happening in the center of the bay.

This was about to change. In April of 1866, a retired and wealthy ship captain, Charles Moss, brought his Chilean wife and two sons from Texas and settled on a small farm about a mile from the present Moss Landing harbor. It’s fascinating to me how or why a ship captain from Texas ended up here in the 1860s. In Captain Moss’ case it was because of his political and philosophical views and he came seeking refuge and ended up on the central coast. The Civil War had just ended and the state of Texas was a member of the Confederacy, which may have been a factor in his desire to leave Texas.

As Captain Moss became more familiar with the Elkhorn Slough area and its natural harbor with its protective sandy peninsula, he soon realized that this would be an ideal place where ships could be loaded.

Charles Moss was about to be joined by another earlier settler, Cato Vierra, who learned the construction trade as a ship carpenter in his native Azores. Cato was an adventurous sort who at 16 years old went to sea as a whaler from Flores, one of the Azores. He even tried his hand at gold mining in New Zealand, Australia and Alaska. Somehow in his travels he arrived in the Elkhorn Slough area in 1867, where he took over Paul Lazere’s salt works and also the Elkhorn Slough ferry. At the time the ferry was the only way across the entrance to the slough for people, horses and wagons.

Together Cato and Charles enlisted the services of some small boats and began loading grain onto coastal ships. Initially, this was a little challenging, as it required that the sacks of grain be carried by men through the surf zone to the small surf boats that could then transfer the grain to larger ships waiting further offshore.
There were two things in their favor at the center of the bay that they may have become aware of, both due to the presence of the head of Monterey Submarine Canyon almost at the shoreline. There was deep water close to shore that allowed larger ships to come in closer to land, and the head of the canyon caused waves to refract or bend away from the canyon leading to smaller waves and calmer water directly on shore.

As the shipping business grew, Cato Vierra built the first wharf, warehouses and bridge approach in what was to become Moss Landing. Needless to say, there was no building permit, no permit from the California Coastal Commission, and no lease required by the State Lands Commission for this early construction.

After several years in the area, Cato apparently got a little lonely. He returned to the Azores, married Maria de Freitas, the daughter of his former schoolmaster, sailed back across the Atlantic and returned to the Moss Landing area from the east coast by train, arriving on Christmas Day 1871.

With the warehouses, a 200-foot long wharf and the bridge to the mainland, Moss Landing soon became a major shipping port for grain, potatoes and beans from the Pajaro and Salinas valleys. Cato also continued to operate the 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.

To be continued…

1874 map that shows the original Moss Landing wharf and the ferry across the entrance to Elkhorn Slough.