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

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Change at Moss Landing

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Moss Landing has changed considerably from the days when Cato Vierra and Captain Charles Moss arrived in the 1860s and began to develop what was to become Moss Landing with its pier, fish processing plants and canneries, salt ponds and a whaling station.

Things were starting to change, however. With William Sandholdt’s help, Standard Oil took over the wharf as a major center for offloading petroleum products. In 1943, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers developed plans for what used to be the Salinas River Channel but what was to become a new and stable entrance for the Moss Landing Harbor. The Salinas River had been rerouted with a more direct connection to the ocean six miles to the south in 1910. The planned Corps of Engineers channel moved the outlet of Elkhorn Slough a mile to the south from its natural outlet and protected it with two rock jetties. This project was completed in 1946.

Kaiser Refractories built a large plant to extract magnesium from seawater for the manufacture of high temperature bricks for steel furnaces on the inland side of the highway in 1945 and forever changed the face of this little town. Their 31 million gallons per day discharge had very high alkalinity and also led to biological impacts on the harbor where they initially dumped the water. The Kaiser plant closed some years ago due to competition from China, however, and is now used for other industrial purposes.

Another big change came when the Moss Landing Power Plant was opened in 1950. It was originally owned and operated by PG&E, and was the largest fossil-fuel-fired power plant in California. Although the plant burned fuel oil for many years, which required regular visits of oil tankers to the bay, the plant converted to natural gas some years ago and also has changed owners several times. The plant uses over a billion gallons a day of cooling water, which is released to the bay about 20 degrees above normal.

A major battle was soon brewing, however, at what was becoming an industrial center. In 1965, Humble Oil, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, and the ancestor of ExxonMobil, purchased 455 acres of property with plans to build a large oil refinery and process 50,000 gallons of crude oil daily. Oil would be pumped from tankers anchored offshore in a pipeline across the beach.

In the minds of some, the oil refinery would be a key component of an envisioned “Moss Landing-Salinas Industrial Corridor” that would stretch from Salinas to Moss Landing.
right through some of the region’s richest farmland. An epic battle ensued with thousands of locals lined up on opposite sides of the debate. Those wanting to preserve the clean air and waters of Monterey Bay were battling others who wanted to increase Monterey County’s tax base and diversity the economy.

1965 was a very different time in our region’s history, however, and much of what we may take for granted today, simply didn’t exist or wasn’t on people’s minds 54 years ago. NOAA didn’t exist and there was no National Marine Sanctuary. The California Coastal Commission was still 11 years away and we had no California Environmental Quality Act or federal Clean Air and Water acts. The first Earth Day, which began to catalyze the environmental movement didn’t take place until 1970.

The refinery plan outraged some Monterey Peninsula residents, who argued that oil spills and smog would destroy the bay, ruin the tourist industry, and bring an end to agriculture in the Salinas Valley. Humble countered that there would be "no significant air pollution," and that the industry would help the county tax base and help fund public schools. In just six days the opponents to the refinery collected 12,000 signatures asking the county to reject the application.

A number of retired industrialists, conservationists, and politicians led the fight against Humble Oil Company's plan for the refinery at Moss Landing. Carmel photographer Ansel Adams and even former Governor Goodwin Knight joined the fight. A fourth of Monterey County residents signed petitions against it, while the Salinas Valley agriculture community was split.

The County Planning Commission opposed it. Although the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, after a 17-hour hearing in December 1965, voted 3-2 in favor of the refinery. Courts upheld the approval, but directors and shareholders of parent Standard Oil got an earful at a subsequent annual shareholders’ meeting. In August 1966, Humble dropped the plans and announced that instead it would build a larger refinery in a more welcoming Benicia. If you drive by industrial Benicia today along the East Bay shoreline, I think you would agree that Benicia’s gain was actually Moss Landing’s gain.

I want to acknowledge the use of an article entitled: “1965: The future that might have been”, by Ken Peterson of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which covered much of this recent history.