One-hundred and thirty-five years ago, on Sunday, July 19, 1885, nearly 30 years before Hawaii’s Duke Kahanamoku introduced surfing to the mainland of the United States, three teenage brothers, also from Hawaii, rode long and very heavy redwood surfboards in the surf at the San Lorenzo River mouth. Their boards were constructed of Santa Cruz Mountains redwood by the Grover Lumber Company of Soquel. These were not the short lightweight foam and fiberglass boards of today that you can carry with one hand and stick in your back seat, but were 17 feet long and tipped the scales at about 175 pounds.

The brothers, who were also princes and all nephews of King Kalakaua, were students at a military academy in San Mateo and were able to take the Suntan Special train to Santa Cruz and enjoy the sport that was part of their heritage back home in Hawaii.

While southern California’s Huntington Beach claims the title of Surf City, USA, and even hired an attorney and went to court in 2006 to protect their name and image, the first surfing actually took place 350 miles north on the shoreline of Monterey Bay in the cold water at the mouth of the San Lorenzo River. So while Huntington Beach claimed the title through the use of attorneys, Santa Cruz could be considered the true Surf City, USA.

About a half-mile west of the river mouth, the Santa Cruz municipal wharf extends 2,745 feet out into Monterey Bay. Built in 1914, it is the last of six different wharves built over the years in this area. Although sources as reliable as Wikipedia report that “it is the longest pier on the West Coast of the United States”, which gives residents a consolation prize of sorts for losing the title of Surf City, USA, it turns out that this isn’t true. Another coastal claim to fame slips away from us.

So who has a longer pier? It’s in Avila Beach, where Highway 101 hits the coast not long after passing through San Luis Obispo. This area has a history of piers somewhat like Santa Cruz, 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.

In 1908, the Avila pier was reconstructed, and in subsequent years was repeatedly damaged during storms and repaired. The discovery of oil in the Central Valley led to the construction of a pipeline from the oil fields to Avila, and for a while in the early 1920s, Port San Luis became the largest crude oil shipping port in the world.

Over the next several decades, UNOCAL (Union Oil of California) became the owner of the pier. They continued to use it primarily as a shipment point for San Joaquin Valley crude oil that was transported to the coast by a 200-mile long pipeline. The severe El Niño winter of 1983,
however, which produced major damage and destruction along the Santa Cruz coast from Capitola to Pajaro Dunes, destroyed much of the UNOCAL pier. Three company employees were assessing damage on the pier during a storm when a 25-foot wave broke over the section where they were standing and the pier collapsed. The three men were able to grab onto a floating section of the pier and were rescued by Harbor Patrol officers about 45 minutes later.

UNOCAL spent $27 million in 1984 to replace the destroyed wooden pier with a steel and concrete pier extending six-tenths of a mile (3,168 feet) into San Luis Bay. Crude oil continued to be shipped from the pier until about 1993 when UNOCAL shut down its oil operations at the pier.

In 2001, the oil company donated their pier to the Center for Coastal Marine Sciences at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. It was converted to a marine research and educational facility and used for scientific and diving programs as well as ocean observing. The Cal Poly website lists the pier as 3000 feet long; measuring precisely from Google Earth indicates the pier is a little over 3000 feet, and when completed it was listed as 0.6 miles (3,168 feet). So, somewhat sadly, Santa Cruz has to move aside on having the longest pier on the west coast and settle for No. 2 (2,745 feet long), but we do have what is perhaps the longest publicly accessible pier on the west coast.