# The First Hotel on Main Street's First Block

—Dave Cresson

The Hotel Mosconi is the Coastside's oldest and still operating hotel. Today it is called the San Benito House. A couple of weeks ago I received a call from friends, Betty and John Renati. They wanted to donate an old clock to the History Association. The clock was part of John's family—and our community's past. It hung on the wall of Hotel Mosconi.

Hotel Mosconi

The hotel is especially interesting to me because our family is part of its list of past managers. Since my days of involvement there, I have learned about the history of the hotel and of that particular block where the hotel still stands.

Manuel Daneri built the Hotel Mosconi on the corner of Half Moon Bay's Main and Mill Streets. That street corner is the first intersection after entering town over the Main Street bridge. The city plan describes that block as "Block 13."

The block fronts on today's Main Street. Long ago, before the first Europeans arrived, that street was likely one of the Ohlone foot paths that crisscrossed the Coastside. Such paths connected their villages, and favorite hunting and collecting grounds. Pilarcitos Creek (the stream the Main Street Bridge crosses) is the northern boundary of the block. It is also the biggest stream between Pacifica and Pescadero. It was a favorite fishing place for local Ohlone people. The village they called "Ssatumnumo" was only a few hundred feet closer to the ocean. It is quite possible that the native people guided the 1769 Spanish Portolá Expedition northward, along that same footpath. The expedition was on its way to finding San Francisco Bay.

Half Moon Bay's Block 13

Portolá's adventure led more Spaniards, and then Mexicans, to arrive and control Ohlone lands and lives in California. Most of that territory, including the Coastside lands, was eventually given as land grants to the well-connected Mexican leaders of Alta California.

The 1841 Candelario Miramontes land grant borders on Pilarcitos Creek, and it extends southward for thousands of acres. It was an undisturbed rancho dotted with the families' adobe homes for several years, even after the Mexicans lost the Mexican-American War in 1848. That land grant is where the early community that became Half Moon Bay first emerged.

It was the gold discovery that brought hundreds of thousands of Americans and Europeans to California. One of the first to come to the Coastside was a newcomer from Spain. Estanislao Zaballa was well educated and experienced. He arrived and married (in 1853) the eldest Miramontes daughter, Dolores. He built his American-style family home as well as a livery stable and a sprawling commercial building in the space that would soon become "Block 13." The building—used as a general store, saloon and hotel—was called the "San Benito

San Benito House & Saloon
(1863 survey footprint—Concept model)

House & Saloon." His enterprises were among the earliest businesses opened on the Coastside. In the years that followed, more businesses came… blacksmith shops, a carriage repair shop, general stores, and saloons. That area became the hub of the new farming community along the Coastside.

In 1863 Zaballa helped resolve lawsuits surrounding the Miramontes family and their misunderstood loans and mortgages. Part of his work was to oversee the division of the property between the litigants. The result was the first legal subdivision of previously open lands on the Coastside. The subdivision created legal streets, city blocks, and building lots that immediately allowed residential and business districts to develop and become a town. That subdivision became today's downtown Half Moon Bay's business district. Zaballa quickly and wisely arranged to record the block where his house and businesses were (that is, Block 13) in his name.

Emmanuelle ("Manuel") Daneri came from northern Italy to the gold country in Calaveras County in the 1850s. He apparently did well in the mines and then moved on to the Coastside in 1873. He ran farming operations in nearby Higgins Canyon. He accumulated large real estate holdings within Half Moon Bay and along the Coastside. Among them was his 1903 purchase of Block 13 and the Zaballa House from the Zaballa children. He demolished the aging San Benito House and Saloon building and replaced it with a stately hotel building at the first corner of the block. It had a second floor balcony surrounding the street sides of the building. Its entry featured a Queen Anne style dormer tower topped with another balcony and flagpole.

Two years later, in 1905, Daneri gave the lease for the hotel to Charles P. ("Charley") Mosconi, a man from Pescadero and Purissima. He named it the "Hotel Mosconi." Just after the hotel opened its doors, it closed for repairs to the damage done by the 1906 earthquake.
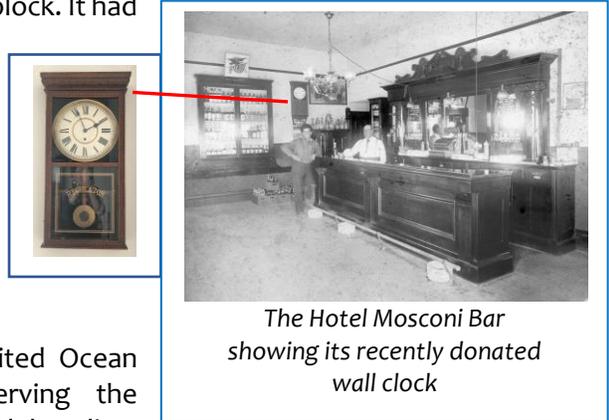
The Hotel Mosconi Bar
showing its recently donated
wall clock
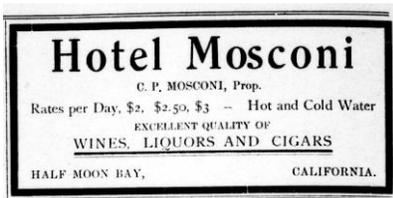
Local newspaper
advertisement, 1910

A year later, the long-awaited Ocean Shore Railroad began serving the Coastside, and that excited hoteliers and real estate speculation.

The Hotel Mosconi management changed hands for the first time in 1915. Eugene Faus renamed the place the "Hotel Half Moon". Faus ran it until the mid-1930s. In 1935 a new manager, Dominic Dagani, took over. Dagani, who was the manager for the longest time in the hotel's history, concentrated more on the bar and the restaurant than he did on the hotel. The place became known simply as Dominic's. ➜

In 1967 your author arrived, following his career from New York City to San Francisco, and settled on the Coastside. Over the years, the family renovated existing buildings and acquired and added new construction across Block 13. Lodging, office spaces, and commercial shops were added and opened. The hope of the more recent construction was to restore the Zaballa House and then make it a centerpiece, set within a functionally modern commercial property that recalls the appearance of an earlier Half Moon Bay.

The Zaballa House today

In 1978, a group of friends (Ron Michelson, Carol Regan, and I) bought the hotel and rejuvenated the building. The stately second floor balconies had been demolished years before, and we approached the city about rebuilding them. The city discouraged that, so the building remains without that splendid feature. Like previous managers, we wanted to rename the hotel. We decided to honor that first hotel that was located close to the spot of this one—the San Benito House. Owning that building (really, the bar) was a source of great fun for our group.

Soon ownership shifted over to our experienced hospitality expert, Carol Regan. Since then, facilities have expanded and improved. Carol passed it on to her son, Gregg, and then, in 2007, to a newcomer couple, Franco and Connie Carruba. Currently it is in the energetic hands of a new corporation.

Meanwhile, the Daneri family drifted away from town while one daughter, Sylvia, stayed on by herself for many years in the old Zaballa House. She built a reputation as a host of grand community barbecues. She expanded and altered the house during her time there. Sylvia passed away in 1957.

This Block 13 is just one of what is now Half Moon Bay's original 20 blocks. And that original subdivision is a small part of the Coastside. But it certainly saw its share of local history. The Ohlone people spent time nearby as it was near a wide, calmer spot of a sometimes racing stream. It was a likely crossing place for the Spanish and then Mexican people as they moved around the Coastside. The Americans built their first crude bridge coming right to that block and then—over a hundred years ago—improved it in 1901 with today's bridge.

From the earliest native peoples to gritty ranchers, then the more commerce-oriented Americans, the block became part of the gateway to a spirited little town. It held the dreams and successes of real people. Some of their memories have faded. Some, gone forever. Still, the oldest continuously working hotel on the Coastside is there. One of the community's earliest houses stands tall. We can imagine that the block—and the community it is part of—will continue to interest and please generations yet to come.

Hotel Mosconi Clock Donated!

The beautiful old Regulator clock that hung on the wall in the Hotel Mosconi bar for many years was part of the Renati family. Betty and John Renati called History Association founder Dave Cresson and very generously offered to donate the clock to the Association. Part of the History Association's mission is to preserve Coastside history, and their generous offer was gratefully accepted!

Regulator clocks were invented in the mid-1700s. They were the most accurate pendulum clocks then available, and were used as the standard of accuracy during manufacturing and repairs.

In the 1800s, regulator clocks became the time standard in American railroad stations. Employees synchronized their pocket watches with the station clocks, to help reduce the number of train collisions.

Regulator clocks were made by many companies, which used the term *regulator* to describe the type of clock and to honor their time-keeping heritage. The clock donated by the Renati family was made by the Sessions Clock Company.

Betty and John Renati present the clock to History Association President Juliette Applewhite.

Thanks to the Renati family, this clock joins the History Association's collection, adding its beauty and historical significance to our museum displays.

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