

Coastside Chronicles

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HALF MOON BAY
HISTORY
ASSOCIATION
Celebrating Coastside Legacies

“I remember my first time under that same hoist when Tony Romeo commented, “you’ve got the knack kid.” - Ernie Koepf

Romeo Pier and the Fishing Life

—Ernie Koepf

Opportunities came in Princeton-by-the-Sea for the Romeo Brothers. Joe, Albee, Domenic and Tony all made their mark in Princeton-by-the-sea. The wharf was built in 1942 and supplied the Romeo Fish Mkt. on Pacific Ave in San Francisco. Albee and Domenic ran the fish market in San Francisco, while Joe and Tony ran the wharf, buying salmon, crab, mackerel and sardines.



At one time there was a conveyor belt from the wharf into the cannery for the wet fish to be canned. The Romeo Bros. also had a boat at one time. It was called the *Charlie*

Romeo. Joe Romeo’s brand of canned fish was called “*Charlie Boy*,” named after his son. That was a trademark that was later sold to StarKist® and became Charlie® the Tuna.

When World War II came, Albee, Domenic and Tony served and Joe had the wharf built. When the brothers came back from the war, they joined the fish business. Around 1950 Joe began the fertilizer business and left the fish for the brothers. In 1969 Joe invented a machine to make the paper sleeves for the potted Easter Lillies and Poinsettias. The fertilizer and sleeves continue today, all run by his children, Charlie, Frankie and Constance.

It was a different port before the breakwater was built and the pier needed to withstand the elements that came with the winter storms. At times, the weather was so forbidding that it was impossible to walk out on the pier for the crashing waves. Sturdy doors and beams were needed to barricade the wharf against breaking seas at these times. The wharf had a kitchen, shower, bunkhouse and all the necessary accommodations for a siege, or for a late night unloading of the boats. Working out of Princeton was a

hard bargain before the breakwater came in 1962. But in the summer months, during salmon season, all was calm and protected from the elements in a geographically natural harbor.

I sold my fish from my first boat to Tony Romeo in 1971. Tony and his wife Vera treated all his boats as family. We would have lunch in his kitchen and gossip. John Healy had a skiff rental on the wharf, and he would see the renters off with an outboard, compass and a boat to fish from.

It was a different port before the breakwater was built and the pier needed to withstand the elements that came with the winter storms.

Once a week, Tony would fire up the massive firehose and wet down the entire dock for the purpose of preserving the wood with saltwater. Massive fuel tanks were stationed on the wharf to service the fleet's need for diesel. If gear or parts were needed by a fisherman, Tony would bring them down the next day from San

Francisco. On Tuesday, Boudin bakery had fresh bread for Tony to bring to his boats. It was family.

As a small child, I have memories of going out on the dock at night to watch my father unload fish. I would count the fish that would go into the fish box from all the unloading boats, anxious to see who the 'highliner' was, hoping it was my dad. If my dad came under the hoist and he was smoking a big Roi-Tan cigar, I knew he would have had a good day fishing. Years later, when I was 20 years old, I remember my first time under that same hoist when Tony Romeo commented "you've got the knack kid" and he handed me my fish ticket which was the receipt for my delivered fish. I still have that first fish ticket in a frame.

The pier was ultimately purchased by the San Mateo County Harbor District and leased out. Its fate was now in the hands of a board of Commissioners who did not recognize its aesthetic value and lessees who allowed it to decay. There will never be another wooden pier in California, and certainly not in Princeton harbor.

Indigenous Fishing: Coastal Waters Provided Food, Tools, and Money

—Ellen Chiri

The coast of San Mateo County extends from Pacifica in the north to Año Nuevo in the south. The first people to inhabit this land, now referred to collectively as Ohlone by contemporary scholars and some descendants, were organized into at least 50 politically autonomous tribal groups. Societal organizations within the tribal groups worked together to direct communal activities that included fishing.

In addition to the bounty of food, the ocean provided material for making tools, for personal adornment, and for trade. For example, abalone was used to make fishhooks as well as pendants and badges that identified organizations. Olivella-shell money was used

all over California, so coastal people provided the medium of exchange for a large economy.

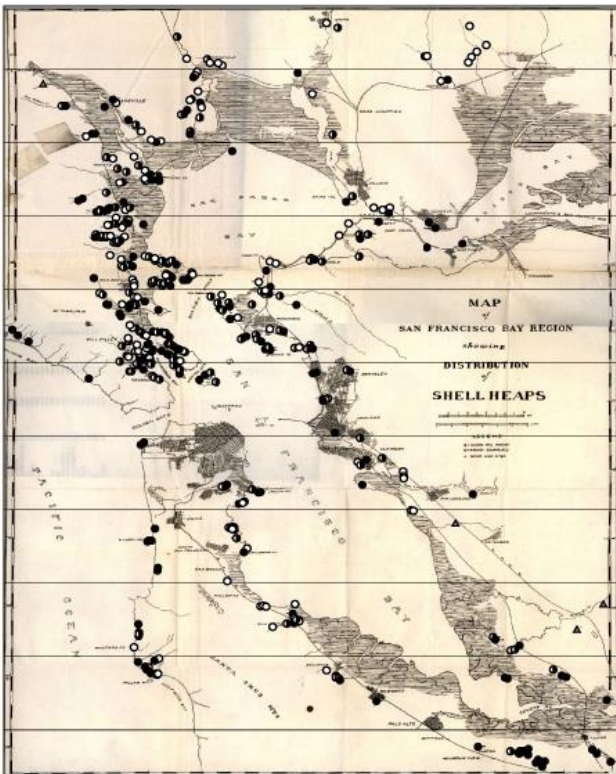
As archaeologist Mark Hylkema said in his 2022 History Association presentation [Ancestral Native American Lifeways of the Half Moon Bay Area](#), the Quiroste people of the Año Nuevo area were "sitting on the bank" because of the wealth of olivella shells there.

The coast's wild-running streams teemed with steelhead trout and salmon, and the people used nets and weirs to catch the bounty.

William H. Brewer was a member of the 1860 California Geological Survey. In his journal, published as *Up and Down California in 1860-1864*, he wrote about the coast:

“...rocks jutting into the sea, teeming with life... Shellfish of innumerable forms, from the great and brilliant abalone to the smallest limpet... millions of them. Crustaceans...of strange forms and brilliant colors, scampered into every nook at our approach...Every pool of water left in the rugged rocks by the receding tide was the most populous aquarium to be imagined...”

The people gathered seaweed from the rocks to be eaten fresh or dried; seaweed was also used to wrap seafood, keeping it cool and preventing spoilage. Shellfish such as mussels were gathered from the rocks; clams were dug from the sand. Abalone was gathered from the rocks, or by women who were adept at deep dives.



In 1909, more than 400 shell mounds remained in the Bay Area. Image courtesy of Matthew Booker and Allen Roberts, Spatial History Lab, Stanford University.

Shell mounds attest to the quantity of shellfish the people consumed. The mounds were more than shell repositories, however—they were also ceremonial places and burial sites holding thousands of years of human history.

A 1909 survey of Bay Area shell mounds showed evidence of over 400, some of them huge. One mound in the East Bay measured 270 feet in diameter and was almost 30 feet deep in the center. Most of the shell mounds are now gone, bulldozed for development.

‘... millions of them. Crustaceans...of strange forms and brilliant colors, scampered into every nook at our approach...’

To catch surf fish, people set out in boats constructed of tule reeds tied into bundles and lashed together. Double-bladed paddles were used to propel the boats, whose lightness and buoyancy helped speed them across the water.



Reproduction tule reed boat. Image courtesy of the California Academy of Sciences.

At the surf’s edge, men and women used conical basketry traps to scoop up huge numbers of smelt. They also caught smelt using two-person seine nets.

As a wave washed ashore, they planted the net's two legs in the sand and hung on as the swiftly receding seawater drove hundreds of the tiny fish into the net.



Basketry fish traps. Image courtesy of Mark Hylkema.

The coast's wild-running streams teemed with steelhead trout and salmon, and the people used nets and weirs to catch the bounty. Weirs were interwoven willow branches and tule reeds attached to stakes. The stakes were pounded into the streambed, arranged in a way that funneled the fish toward a harpooner or into a basketry trap.

The coast's sea and streams provided raw material for tools, currency that enabled trade items with inland tribal groups—and added deliciously to the people's largely plant-based diet. Continuing traditional foodways today, descendants of the first people prepare dishes such as traditionally smoked salmon, broth with mussels, clams, and seaweed, and salad with watercress and pickleweed.

Something's Fishy about Pescadero

—Marc Strohlein

The San Mateo coast is dotted with towns and places with colorful names. Many of those names have historical connections—some obvious, others not. Take Pescadero for instance. “Pesca,” the root of the town name Pescadero means “to fish” translated from Spanish. Yet venture to Pescadero and you'll find a quaint town, a legendary roadhouse and restaurant, historic architecture, and an assortment of craft shops, but not many fish. So where did the name come from?



Pescadero Creek and the Community Church, built in 1867. (Ed Weeks Collection, date unknown).

Fish clearly played a role in the naming and history of Pescadero, but how and when?

“... a wagon load of these beautiful fish, weighing from two to thirty pounds, are taken daily and sold all along the road, as high up as Spanishtown at seventy-five cents per pound.”

The early inhabitants of the area were Ohlone Native Americans who controlled the lower Pescadero and Butano drainages and certainly benefited from abundant fish.

An article in the June 9, 1960 *Redwood City Tribune* noted “It has been said that the Spanish named the town Pescadero, which means “fishing place, due to the observations they made of the Indians frequenting the creeks with traps.” Yet the Pescadero name only shows up in existing historical documents somewhat later. The name *Arroyo del Pescadero* appears on the

diseños, or maps used in land grant documentation of the 1830s, and in 1833, Don Juan José Gonzales received the *Rancho Pescadero* land grant, or San Antónío as it was officially known, from Governor Figueroa.

Erwin Gustav Gudde, in his book *California Place Names: The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names*, adds further seemingly conflicting information, stating “in maritime Spanish, the word is used for fishing place.” He goes on to note that “in 1861, in the Las Animas land-grant case John Gilroy testified that “Pescadero draws its name from the fact of our catching salmon there,” and a few days later in a different case, he stated that “the Castros (possible Jose Joaquin Castro, who was an original Juan Bautista de Anza Expedition member), I and an Indian gave it that name in 1814, being a place where we used to catch salmon.”

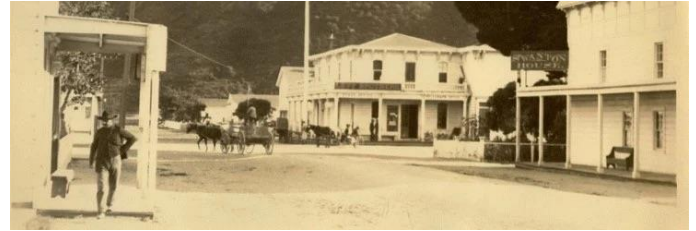
“Their flavor is as fine as that of real mountain trout.”

Confusing the matter a bit more, the Cambridge Dictionary defines pescadero as “fishmonger,” or seller of fish.

Regardless of which version of the naming you subscribe to, it wasn’t until the latter half of the 1800s that Pescadero and Butano creeks became renowned as sports fishing streams for vacationing San Franciscans, helping spur development of hotels and other amenities for visitors.

By 1880 Pescadero had a reputation as one of the choicest locations for San Francisco sportsmen. From 1876 to 1880, *The Redwood City Times and Gazette* published newspaper articles extolling the virtues of Pescadero and Butano creek trout fishing, with one writer who declared: “During the months of May and June one person may catch as many as a hundred [trout] a day. Their flavor is as fine as that of real mountain trout. May, June, and July are gay months at

Pescadero, and large numbers of San Francisco people resort there to fish. There have been days when the boarders of the Swanton House (a prominent hotel in the town) brought home a thousand trout.”



Swanton House. Photo courtesy of Sense of Place Pescadero website.

In the first biennial report of the California Commissioner of Fisheries published in 1871, Captain E. Wakeman wrote “Pescadero stream—Is three miles from Pompona [Pomponio] Creek, and is a fine clear water trout stream, empties into the sea about two miles below the town, and connects, one mile from the beach, with the Butena River [Butano Creek].” He goes on to say, “a wagon load of these beautiful fish, weighing from two to thirty pounds, are taken daily and sold all along the road, as high up as Spanishtown [now Half Moon Bay], at seventy-five cents per pound.”

Despite the popularity of fishing near Pescadero, the late 1800s through the mid 20th century saw a ‘tug of war’ among farmers, loggers and lumber mills, anglers, and conservationists. Later, farmers built levees and filled in marshland trying to irrigate crops while keeping saltwater from encroaching on their fields. Loggers were cutting trees and building logging roads which eliminated shade and increased sedimentation. Meanwhile, conservationists and anglers were trying to save fish populations.

Logging in the region began to seriously impact the two creeks, especially the dumping of sawdust from mills directly into streams. An article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* in 1871 described the practice: “it has been the practice, heretofore, for years, to remove sawdust from the various mills by sluicing it into the running streams.” Numerous lawsuits were brought against the

sawmill owners but an 1867 Santa Cruz Sentinel article states “...the sawmills on the Pescadero have temporarily injured the fishing, from the sawdust running down the creek...”

The combination of fishing pressure and logging apparently diminished fish populations and efforts turned to restocking streams. The California Fish Commission was established in 1870, and in February of 1877 brought 12,000 trout into San Mateo County streams and rivers and 3,000 more in 1880. Yet further degradation occurred when farmers began building levees and drained small areas of the marsh by the late 1920s.

Substantial levee building and conversion of marshlands to agriculture occurred during the 1930s and continued through the early 1960s. Draglines were used to move sediment and build levees until the introduction of new fish protection laws in 1963 halted the practice.

The early 1900s saw continued stresses to the streams and fish populations, yet there were some reports of excellent fishing through the 1940s. The construction of the Highway One bridge across Pescadero Creek along with continued construction of levees and dikes contributed to a continuing decline in fish populations with Butano Creek blocked from the marsh, and periods where marsh waters were oxygen depleted. And ironically, the state-mandated halt to dredging by farmers is believed by some to have increased sedimentation and the blockage of Butano Creek.

Meanwhile, conservationists and anglers were trying to save fish populations.

A November 2019 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported “Steelhead are still found in the watershed, but studies have shown that their numbers have declined steadily from about 10,000 in 1985 to less than 750 a few years ago. No coho were returning to the two

creeks by 2003, when 17,000 hatchery-raised coho were released into Pescadero Creek. Researchers said only three of their descendants were counted in 2015.”



Restoration work in Pescadero Marsh. Photo courtesy of San Mateo Resource Conservation District.

In 2017, the NOAA Restoration Center awarded the San Mateo Resource Conservation District more than \$1.4 million. The funding supported restoration work in Butano Creek. San Mateo County and the California Department of Parks and Recreation provided additional funding and support.

The project involved removal of sediment to open up Butano Creek to migrating fish as well as removal of sedimentation below the Pescadero Creek Bridge to alleviate flooding and was completed in October 2019. In 2020, NOAA and partners released 10,000 juvenile coho salmon into Pescadero Creek with the hope that Butano and Pescadero Creeks could ultimately support 2,300 adult spawning salmon.

Like many other streams that historically supported substantial migrating trout and salmon populations, Pescadero and Butano Creek face a long uphill battle to return to any semblance of historical conditions—we can only hope that one day trout and salmon teem in the creeks and Pescadero once again becomes a fishing place.

When Mussels Saved the Day

—Marc Strohlein

Eating mussels at local restaurants is an enjoyable pastime, but few diners realize the role that the tasty mollusks played in shaping the early and more recent history of the coast. Native Americans were the first to harvest mussels on the San Mateo coast, dating back several thousand years ago. Mussels were an important food source for the coastal Ohlone tribes, evidenced by shells found in archaeological digs at middens or shell mounds found around the bay area.

Mussels also played an important, perhaps even lifesaving, role in the Portola Expedition of 1769 which traversed the west coast from Mexico to a site near present-day Pacifica. A translation of the diary of Governor Gaspar de Portola by David L. Farebrother contains two entries mentioning mussels. The first on October 30, 1769, states that a “nearby beach provides an abundance of mussels for the hungry soldiers,” while the second on November 2, 1769, notes that “the soldiers are barely subsisting on a diet of mussels and venison supplemented with seedcakes supplied by the Indians.”



*Portola Expedition camp site at the foot of Martini Creek.
Photo courtesy of California Historical Landmarks.*

The expedition often struggled with obtaining sufficient food, and clearly mussels were found at a pivotal moment.

In an interesting side note about the expedition, archeologist Mark Hylkema has researched the pre-history of Native Americans along with the journals of the Portola expedition.

A 2015 article on the Coastside State Parks website notes that an entry from Fray Juan Crespi on October 30, 1769, of the journey caught his attention, “We stopped not far from the shore at the foot of some hills which prevent us from passing along the beach. They form a valley sheltered from the north, from which flows an arroyo with plenty of good water. ... I called the point *Angel Custodio*, but on account of the large number of mussels which they found on this beach, very good and large, the men called it Punta de las Almejas.”

The encampment was near Montara Beach and Hylkema wondered if the expedition might have left the shells found at an archaeological site found on the cliffs above the beach, designated CA-SMA-132. He knew it was likely impossible to prove that the Portola Expedition consumed those exact mussels but was intrigued about dating the shells to see if their origin coincided with the Expedition timetable. He also noted that “... we needed to document the age of the site as part of the environmental review for proposed improvements to public access near the site.” With help from the Coastside State Parks Association and a lab in Florida, Mark was able to establish that the samples dated from the year 1100, and the other from year 550, putting them over a millennium before the Expedition.

More recently, mussels played an important role for “Boss” John Patroni, the so-called “Padrone” of Princeton during the Prohibition era. Along with a substantial bootlegging business, Patroni had a high-profile inn in Princeton harbor. June Morall wrote in her blog *Half Moon Bay Memories* “Patroni owned the aptly named Patroni House, a prohibition roadhouse that once stood where the Half Moon Bay Brewery is located today in Princeton.” She went on to say that “Patroni also took pride in the food he served” and his mussels were especially popular.

Morall interviewed Mario Vellutini who stated, “Patroni gave big meals at low prices, and if people stayed for the weekend, he gave them discounts.” Mario recalled seeing 500 people in Princeton at one time—“a tremendous crowd. Those were the days when folks traveled to the Coastsides to dine on the delicious local mussels.”

Patroni was also a notorious bootlegger and used his Inn to provide food and lodging to government officials, agents, and law enforcement officers as “favors” in return for advance warning of raids on his establishment. When the Prohibition agents headed for Patroni’s,” Vellutini told Morall, “somebody called from Redwood City to warn him.”



Patroni House. Photo Courtesy of Half Moon Bay Memories author June Morrall.

The most recent history of mussels on the coast has not been as favorable or notable. The January 2021 *Half Moon Bay Review* contained a story entitled *Who’s harvesting Pillar Point mussels?* The article noted that Mavericks Beach “became a hub for more than just spectators

hoping to watch surfers ride some of the best waves in years,” noting that “low tide brought many young visitors and families, carrying buckets and shovels, hoping to dig for mussels, urchins and snails that they could bring home and eat.” An article in the January 2021 *Bay Nature* magazine questioned whether the popularity of harvesting mussels at Pillar Point actually threatens the mussel population and the reef itself.



California mussels. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

The article noted that a marine biologist, Alison Young, was at Pillar Point a month earlier and found an estimated 400 people, most she believed there to harvest shellfish. With a license, harvesting of shellfish is legal which is a big draw, but she posted on twitter that recreational harvesting at Pillar Point had become “completely unsustainable.”

It's interesting to consider the importance of mussels in Coastsides history—how would the Portola expedition have fared and how successful would Patroni’s bootlegging, much less his inn and restaurant have been without mussels? Hopefully mussel populations will survive to write future chapters in Coastsides history.

“When the Prohibition agents headed for Patroni’s,” Vellutini told Morall, “somebody called from Redwood City to warn him.”

President's Message

—Juliette Applewhite

Fall has been busy for the HMB History Association. All our teams have been working to evaluate and improve our offerings. The museum design team continues to enhance both of our museums. Our education team began welcoming school field trips to our site for the first time this year with a personalized program for the students.

The grant team is thrilled to be working on the education grant funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services which we received this summer. Our programs team is working on a fabulous line up for next year.

We are always looking for people to help us to preserve, celebrate and share our vast local history. We are gearing up for a fabulous 2024 and hope you will all become members.

I invite you to visit our website to read more intriguing articles, and to watch videos: halfmoonbayhistory.org.

Exciting Progress with Current Programs

The Education Committee hosted two field trips for local elementary schools. Enthusiastic students first learned about local history and then got the opportunity to work hands-on learning how to make butter, use a mortar and pestle, and try basket and yarn weaving.

We selected a candidate in accordance with our recent grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in the Lifelong Learning category.

We recruited and trained two new docents for our newly opened Coastside Museum. In addition, two high school students expressed an interest in docenting. So far one has been trained. Stay tuned for more updates.

Help Preserve Coastside History

The Half Moon Bay History Association is dedicated to bringing together all members of the community, to preserve and share the history of the San Mateo County Coastside, from Montara to Año Nuevo.



Our history is the lives and works of all the cultures that made the Coastside what it is today, from the times of the earliest Ohlone villages, to the Spanish and Mexican periods, through the early American period, to modern times. Our mission is to educate as we preserve, honor, and celebrate Coastside history.

Oral History Program

Our oral history program continues to record personal memories of Coastside residents. If you, or someone you know, have Coastside stories from long ago, let us know! Email us at info@halfmoonbayhistory.org.

History Mysteries

Do you have a Coastside history mystery you'd like us to investigate? Email us at info@halfmoonbayhistory.org

Volunteer Help Wanted

Our Education, Oral History, and Program Committees would love to have your help. Do you have experience designing websites or writing grants? We need you! Email us at info@halfmoonbayhistory.org

Let Us Hear from You

Stop by the museum at 505 Johnston Street, Half Moon Bay, CA.

Follow us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/HMBHistory/>).

Send mail to us at Half Moon Bay History Association, 625 Miramontes Street, Ste 203, Half Moon Bay, CA 94019 or call us (650) 479-1935.

Check out our [YouTube videos](#).

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