

# Coastside Chronicles

A Publication of the Half Moon Bay History Association

Summer 2022

## In This Issue

From the President ..... page 1

Frank P. Brophy and the Princeton-by-the-Sea  
Beach Resort ..... page 2

Silvio Modena and the old bell—where did the bell  
come from? Where is it now? .....page 4

R.I. Knapp, the Coastside’s famous inventor, and  
a leading citizen .....page 5

Ancient ruins at Cañada Verde beach? .....page 7

History Mystery! Do you recognize these safes? .....page 8

“If this should ring a bell for anyone, please chime in!”  
--Silvio Modena



## From the President

—Juliette Applewhite

Let me begin by saying THANK YOU! The great support we received through Coastside Gives was, honestly, very moving. We raised over \$19,000, including checks that were mailed. With your help, the design phase of the new Coastside History Museum is moving forward!

Construction on the museum building is nearly complete. We are awaiting supplies for the lighting and solar installation, and a few finishing details. We hope to have the museum completed by the end of June 2022, and to have exhibits in the museum by early 2023.

We are very grateful to our docents! They have made it possible to keep the jail museum doors open on weekends, and during the "Make It Main Street" events held each Thursday. We are always looking for new volunteers—we have many ways that you can help! ♦

## Volunteer with the Coastside History Museum!

- Share your love of the Coastside and help keep local history alive! We offer training to get you started.
- Set the stage for what our visitors can see and do on their coastal journey.
- Chat with visitors from around the world—and with our Coastside neighbors.

Or would you like to volunteer for something other than the museum?

Let us know what interests you! Email us at [VolunteerNowHMBHA@gmail.com](mailto:VolunteerNowHMBHA@gmail.com)

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## Frank P. Brophy and the Princeton-by-the-Sea Beach Resort

—Marc Strohlein

The town of Princeton is known today for its harbor and fishing fleet, its proximity to Mavericks, and most recently an upswell of distillers, micro-breweries, and eateries. Yet the history of Princeton-by-the-Sea, as it was originally named, is both varied and intriguing.

If you've walked around the town you might wonder why the town is named Princeton—and why the streets are named after ivy league schools—Yale, Harvard, Cornell, Princeton? And more important, where is the beach resort?

The answer to the first question is that the town is reportedly named after San Francisco realtor and promoter Frank P. Brophy's dog Princeton. The street names are likely a continuation of the Princeton theme, and they did add a cosmopolitan touch to the town. Even more interesting is that Brophy tried to make Princeton a premier resort, in fact "the most select beach resort on the Pacific Coast," as reported in the July 6, 1912 edition of the San Francisco *Call* newspaper.

The land on which the town is located was part of the Rancho Corral de Tierra Mexican land grant to Francisco Guerrero-Palomares in 1839, who died leaving the land to his wife Josefa. She married James Denniston, who established a large and successful rancho named Denniston Ranch, and in 1859 built the first wharf on Half Moon Bay to ship his produce. The small village of Denniston, near Denniston Creek, that grew near the wharf had a school, built in 1873, and a voting precinct.

In 1908 when the Ocean Shore Railroad began arriving in nearby Granada, Frank Brophy sensed an opportunity and bought land west of Denniston Creek for his proposed Princeton-by-the-Sea village. In the same year he laid out the town and built the Princeton Hotel.

Brophy was an accomplished realtor and developer based in San Francisco who had extensive experience with beach property on the Atlantic Coast and in

Southern California. Newspaper reports claimed that his experience gave him the "advantage of knowing the great future that was in store for the beach property."

Brophy was also quite an entrepreneur and promoter. The July 22, 1910 issue of the *Coastside Comet* explained that "Mr. Brophy has laid out this townsite in a very ideal manner, putting in first class streets, cement sidewalks, curbs, shade trees, sewers and water mains and giving it the earmarks of what will soon be a very attractive and beautiful seaside suburban city."

Brophy promoted Princeton-by-the-Sea as "destined to be the playground for a million people," based on its proximity to San Francisco. The town was even touted as a sort of bedroom community where people would be able to live and go to and from their offices in San Francisco within forty or forty-five minutes.



Newspaper articles and advertisements extolled the "fine fishing and hunting at all seasons of the year; also, fine bathing." The shallow waters in Half Moon Bay were another draw. One pitch proclaimed that a "child 10 years old is perfectly safe in bathing here on account of the lack of undertow," due to sheltering afforded by Pillar Point. For others, the promised health benefits of the mild climate and sea breezes were an attraction. →

## Frank P. Brophy and the Princeton-by-the-Sea Beach Resort ...continued

Most of all, Princeton-by-the-Sea was sold as an investment, with future potential to make money from early purchases of lots—much as others had done at Long Beach in Southern California. To increase the appeal of the lots, Brophy served as an agent for general architect and builder W. H. Jackson, who built several bungalows in the resort.

Brophy described the big plans and improvements that he was undertaking including Princeton Park, located near the hotel, a large dancing pavilion, tennis courts and athletic grounds, ornamental landscaping, a “water system second to none,” and a tent city for visitors. By 1912, the motor launch *Princeton* was available for fishing parties visiting the hotel.

The inducements apparently worked, as the Ocean Shore Railroad company announced in 1912 that it had sold by far more tickets to Princeton-by-the-Sea during the past year than to any of the other beaches on the Ocean Shore line. The *Comet* noted that Brophy “ran an excursion to Princeton last Sunday. He had 380 visitors and sold \$15,000 worth of property.” Lots were advertised as low as \$400, roughly \$12,000 in today’s purchasing power. It was also reported that Brophy “expects to dispose of the few remaining lots at Princeton-By the-Sea before summer is out, and those wishing to get property there should speak at once.”

The future seemed bright for the fledgling resort but there was a dark cloud on the horizon—the demise of the Ocean Shore Railroad.

Visitors today will find few remnants and reminders of those early days. Modern day Princeton is a mix of a few residences and an eclectic assortment of commercial and industrial businesses.

As the railroad that “reaches the beaches,” Ocean Shore had big plans for bath houses, hotels and restaurants, and amusement resorts. The dreams were largely unrealized and most of the structures have

disappeared due to abandonment and neglect, fires, and extensive remodeling. Many of the lots were bought by investors who never developed them. What became of Brophy is not known other than a news story that describes him being shot at by a jealous wife who mistook him for her husband, and another about being injured in a car accident.

So where is the beach resort of this article’s title? The answer is in the Ocean Shore Railroad’s story—it ceased operations in 1920, dooming those early efforts to turn the coast into a string of beach resort towns.

The Princeton Hotel is unique in that it is one of the few remaining structures of that era and is still easily recognizable from earlier photographs. Gaze at the Mezza Luna Restaurant and you are looking at one of the last vestiges of Frank Brophy’s vision.



The Princeton Hotel then and now

Despite the setbacks, Princeton-by-the-Sea lived on and found new life in the Prohibition era. Stay tuned for the next chapter of the town’s story! It will appear in the Autumn issue of this publication. ♦

## Silvio Modena and the old bell—where did the bell come from? Where is it now?

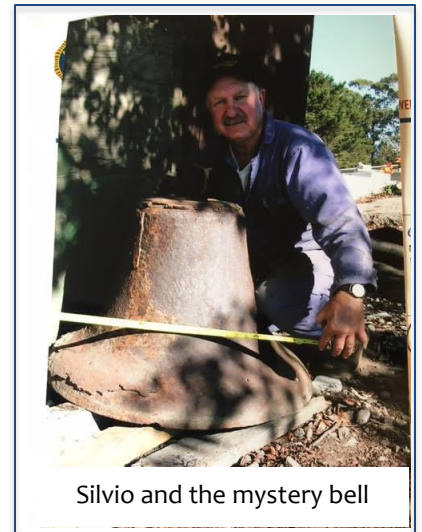
—Ellen Chiri

Silvio Modena has an affinity for bells. He learned to weld as a youth while working on the family farm at San Gregorio. After serving in the Navy, he worked in the shipyards as a boilermaker, and one day he happened to tap a compressed air cylinder.

The pleasing resonance of the cylinder started him thinking about bells. So Silvio began making bells—he started his business I Make Bells in the early 1980s. His bells are of many shapes and sizes, with designs inspired by nature. And all have beautiful tones.

In 2008, Silvio found a bell at Our Lady of the Pillar cemetery, on the hill east of town. The bell was of cast materials and had two metal clappers. The yoke was burned off, and the outside identifying numbers were also burned off. The bell was 21 inches in diameter at the lip, and 32 inches long to the yoke. It appeared to weigh over 200 pounds.

Our Lady of the Pillar cemetery is the second Catholic cemetery in Half Moon Bay, dating from 1923. The first, Pilarcitos Cemetery, was established in 1820. In the 1850s, Half Moon Bay's first Catholic church was built in the middle of the Pilarcitos Cemetery. That church was destroyed by fire in the late 1870s... and that church had a bell.



Silvio and the mystery bell



Fire damage on the mystery bell

The bell Silvio found appeared fire-damaged. Could it be the bell from Half Moon Bay's first Catholic church? We might never know. After finding the bell, Silvio laboriously set it atop a pallet. He planned to return for it with a forklift so he could take it home and restore it.

But when he returned, the bell was gone, and many attempts to locate it brought no answers. Who took that historic bell? Where is it now?

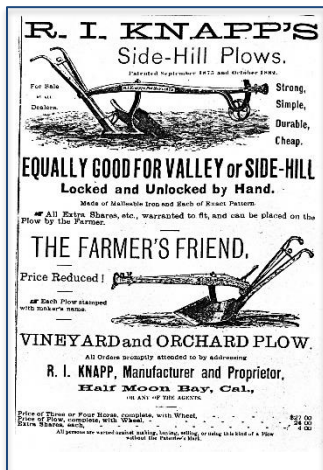
Silvio says: "If this should ring a bell for anyone, please chime in!" Email us at [info@halfmoonbayhistory.org](mailto:info@halfmoonbayhistory.org). ♦

## R.I. Knapp, the Coastside's famous inventor and a leading citizen

—Dave Cresson

In last summer's History Association publication, an article reported on Coastsideers who came up with amazing inventions. That article started with Robert I. Knapp, the innovator who brought national attention to Half Moon Bay during his time.

In summary... In an economy that was still primarily agricultural, Knapp thought of a dramatically improved way to make a horse-drawn plow work more efficiently on hillsides. His invention became nationally recognized as a major improvement. That saved farmers precious hours during their workdays. It made Knapp wealthy. (See *Coastside Chronicles*, May/June 2021.)

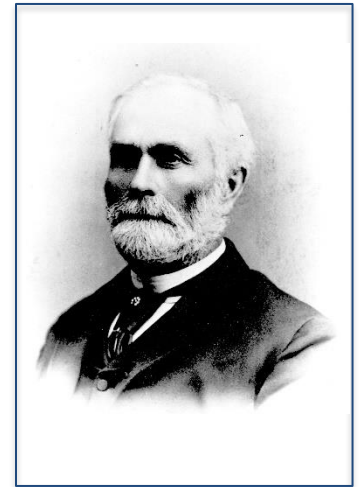


Knapp was more than an ingenious plow maker. He had a mind to see opportunities and the courage to try to seize them. He also loved his neighbors, and so he served them tirelessly with community leadership and service. He had his helping hands on much of the growing

town's development as it entered the twentieth century.

R. I. Knapp came from a family line that dared to make big life changes. Over two hundred years before he came to California, his ancestors left England and came to the new world, arriving in Massachusetts in 1630. Their risks in becoming colonists in a foreign land were like R.I. Knapp's choice to start a new life on California's faraway frontier after the Gold Rush.

He was a skilled blacksmith, already married and with seven children when he left New York. (He and his wife had three more children in California.) They came to California by ship, crossing to the Pacific through Panama in 1863—overland,



before the Panama Canal was built. He went first to Sonoma County. In 1871 his family moved to Spanishtown, as Half Moon Bay was called then by English-speakers, as he heard that it was a fast-growing town. There he partnered with an established blacksmith in town, W.P. Quinlan.

Knapp quickly embraced the town. He and his wife joined the Methodist Church, and the local prohibitionist group called the Good Templars. For the rest of his life, relationships with his Coastside neighbors were highly important to him.

His reputation grew as he added new skills. He became a wheelwright, repairing wagon wheels, then added general wagon repairs to his services. With family, church, and his business, he still found the time to invent that sidehill plow. Somehow, he did that and figured out how to get it patented by the U.S. Patent Office. His first patent was issued in 1875.

He was a still youthful 42 years old when his career changed from smithy into a marketing and management executive. As new plow orders were flooding in, Knapp stepped up his involvement in the community. ➔

## R.I. Knapp, Coastside inventor and a leading citizen...continued

In 1878 Knapp became the Superintendent of the Half Moon Bay schools. Then he ran for election and won the job as the town's Justice of the Peace. At the same time, he could not resist looking for new opportunities, and seizing them. He joined some neighbors and friends as they made a gold claim—right nearby, on the coastline at Miramar.

Then, his manufacturing shop caught fire and burned to the ground, triggering more changes for Knapp—and the town. The townspeople couldn't put the blaze out with their bucket brigade and wet blankets.

Knapp bought a different building, with extra open property between Main and Purissima Streets. That gave him the space he needed to increase the production of his plows.

More important to Half Moon Bay was that he and another prominent local businessman, Joseph Debenedetti, organized a collection among the townspeople to buy firefighting supplies to be more successful in fighting future fires. They soon bought and stored two hundred feet of hose, buckets, fire axes and a cart to carry them. Thus began the process of organizing an effective force of volunteer firefighters, prepared for the next time cries of "FIRE!" went out.

Knapp expanded his social network as he became a member and officer of the Masons. As a service to both the Methodist Church and to his prohibitionist Good Templars group, he started printing a newsletter in his office that was called the "Weekly Messenger." A year or so later, he purchased an established local newspaper called the "Coast Advocate." He also, along with other local influential men, joined a group that history condemns—Half Moon Bay's Anti-Chinese Association.

It was his larger projects that moved the town forward with the times. In 1890, Knapp started the town's

waterworks. He collected, purified, and piped water for miles out of Digges Canyon and laid the piping to serve downtown Half Moon Bay. Always concerned about fire, he added fire hydrants along the streets.

His good works were both large and small. His granddaughter pictured him simply: "Grandfather was considerate of others." She went on to describe the community watering trough he built on Main Street for teams of horses, with a separate fresh-water spigot and a cup for thirsty people.

Later, Knapp, together with his adult children, brought electricity to town. The astonishing Knapps decided to build a refinery to process oil from small wells in nearby Purísima Canyon. It served locals with natural gas service for a while, but the business failed a few years after R.I. Knapp's death after an explosion and fire.

In 1904, R. I. Knapp passed away in his family home on Johnston Street. After his death, the family moved the plow business to San Jose.

The age of farm tractors and the automobile, as well as competition from the likes of the John Deere Company, resulted in the Knapp business

folding in the early 1920s.

The world has likely forgotten Knapp's inventions. But Knapp's spirit of blending work with respect for family and neighbors remains part of today's Coastside. ♦



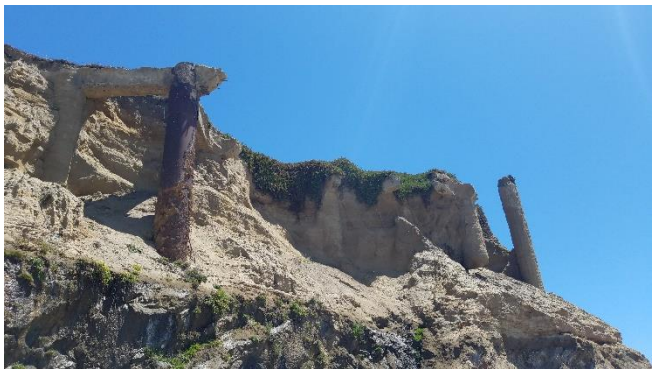
Historian Clyde Arbuckle demonstrating the plow in 1955.  
—Courtesy of History San José

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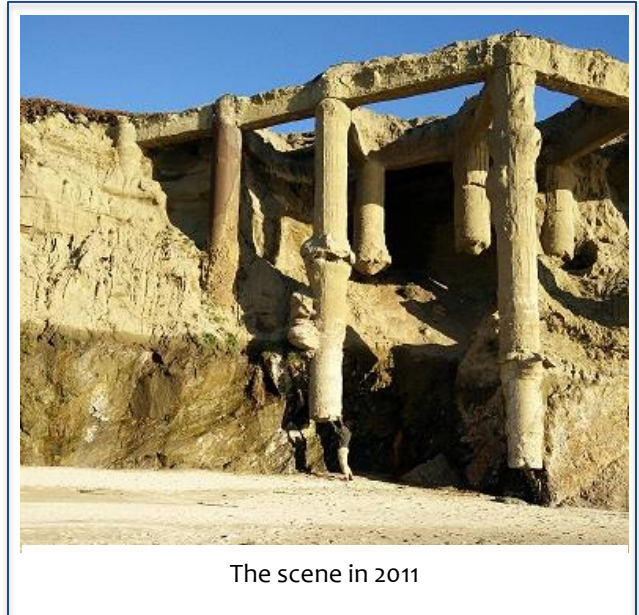
## Ancient ruins at Cañada Verde beach?

—Ellen Chiri

If you wander Cañada Verde beach at low tide, you might find what look like the remains of some ancient civilization. Cañada Verde (green glen) beach is at the end of Miramontes Point Road. It is sometimes called the Ritz beach because it's near that blufftop hotel. The beach is named for the ravine that was the southern boundary of Candelario Miramontes' 1841 Mexican land grant; the Cañada Verde creek runs out to sea there.



The scene today, just west of the Ritz-Carlton hotel



The scene in 2011

The pillars emerging from the bluff on the ocean side of the Ritz-Carlton hotel once supported the foundation of a hotel that was begun in the 1970s but was never built.

In 2017 safety concerns about the crumbling remains, and the area's rapid bluff erosion, prompted the removal of most of the structure. ♦

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## History Mysteries

Do you have a Coastside history mystery you'd like us to investigate? Let us know!

Email us at [info@halfmoonbayhistory.org](mailto:info@halfmoonbayhistory.org).

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## History Mystery! Do you recognize either of these safes?

—Dave Olson

The Half Moon Bay History Association found these safes in the old garage / barn that is being remodeled to house our expanded Coastside History Museum.

We believe that both safes were donated to the Spanishtown Historical Society. We also believe that one of the safes was from the Bank of Half Moon Bay (later the Bank of Italy, which became the Bank of America). The building is now Half Moon Bay City Hall.

If you know anything about either of these safes, or have information that might help us identify them, please contact me at [daveolson@gmail.com](mailto:daveolson@gmail.com)



This safe is approximately 4' 6" tall  
by 3' 6" wide and 2' 6" deep



This safe is approximately 5' tall by  
3' wide and 2' deep



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## Help preserve Coastside history

Half Moon Bay History Association brings together all members of the community, from Montara to Año Nuevo, to preserve, celebrate, and share the history of the San Mateo Coastside.



Our history is the lives and works of all the cultures that made the Coastside what it is today—from the first Ohlone people, to the Spanish and Mexican periods, through the early American period, to modern times.

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## Articles and videos!

Visit the History Association website to read more intriguing articles, and to watch videos—[halfmoonbayhistory.org](http://halfmoonbayhistory.org)

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## Oral histories

Does your family have history on the Coastside? Do you, or someone you know, have Coastside stories from long ago?

Our Oral History team is gathering personal histories... may we add yours? Let us know! Email us at [info@halfmoonbayhistory.org](mailto:info@halfmoonbayhistory.org)

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## Our Board of Directors

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## Let us hear from you!

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