history

Logging in the Augmentation

Debra Staab

In 1776, the Anza expedition brought Spanish colonists and settlers to our area. When Napoleon Bonaparte toppled the Spanish Crown in 1808, Spain's hold on its colonies diminished. Within a decade, insurgents fought royal forces in the Mexican War of Independence. The federal republic of Mexico was codified in 1824.

The new Mexican government offered large land grants to build up the area. Within the Aptos Creek watershed, three grants were distributed. They included 6,700 acres at Rancho Aptos to Rafael Castro and 1,700 acres at Rancho Soquel to Martina Maria Castro in 1833. Martina was granted another 35,000 acres at Soquel Augmentation in 1844. Both Martina and Rafael were children of Joaquin Castro, a Spanish soldier and descendent of the Spanish Castile line.

Initially, the Spanish settlers did not recognize the immense value of redwood trees as building material. They had always constructed their homes from adobe bricks, which they made themselves. Wood was only used for roof beams. However, by 1832 the secret was out and Rafael Castro installed one of the first saw pits in the area. At the time, trees were harvested primarily for personal use.

Today, some 60 percent of the Aptos Creek watershed lies within The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park. Most of the remaining watershed lies in the Soquel State Demonstration Forest. It is protected through a highly controlled harvesting plan.

After the eras when Native Americans enjoyed and cared for the Aptos Creek area, and the Spanish and Mexicans took only what they needed, the region endured significant destruction. The prospective value of harvesting redwood for commercial purposes was intoxicating to American and European pioneers as they arrived in the Santa Cruz Mountains starting in the 1840s. Dozens of lumber barons clear-cut the giants for profit, especially between 1852 and 1942.

Early Logging. The process of logging redwoods is not as simple as felling a sapling with an axe. Taking down a 10- to 20-foot-diameter tree standing 200 feet tall took significant planning and careful action. A year or two before logging began, a cruiser would locate and mark specific trees to be cut down. Some were tagged for shingles and shakes. Lower-quality trees were marked for lumber.

The person who did the felling was called a timber faller or chopper. They had to calculate exactly where to cut the tree and then clear the area where the tree would land. If they made any mistakes, the tree could shatter when it fell. Prior to felling, peelers would remove the bark from nearby tan oaks in case the redwood fall damaged the oak trees. It could take three to four days to fell a large tree.

Fallen trees were then cut into rough segments by buckers and their bark peeled by peelers. Some of the first logging sites popped up in the 1840s near creek beds, where the trees were easily accessible and the roughly cut logs could be floated to the mill for further processing. These easy pickings were soon exhausted, and lumbermen were forced to use other tactics for moving the logs.

Their next solution for getting the logs to the mills was to bring in horses, mules, and oxen. It was a significant effort to train the animals, but their strength lent invaluable support to the process. To assist the animals, skid roads were built by placing horizontal wooden strips along a trail at regular intervals. The teams were able to haul as much as 600 tons of logs containing about 57,000 board feet of lumber.

As the demand for redwood rose, so did logging innovations. By the 1880s, the first steam donkey was installed. This device used steam from a wood-burning boiler. When the machine was fired up, drums and cables pulled the logs along the ground or overhead on cables. The downside was that hundreds of gallons of water were needed to complete a single logging operation. Nonetheless, along with oxen, steam donkeys were an essential piece of equipment for hauling logs in the Santa Cruz Mountains from the 1880s to the 1930s.

Early Milling. Milling methods also evolved. The earliest process was pit sawing. It involved two men, a long straight whipsaw, and a deep enough pit to allow one man to stand under a log laid across the pit opening. Another stood at the top.

Pit sawing soon gave way to ratchet frames that moved back and forth under a mechanical saw until the entire log was sliced into board sized pieces. To increase output, some mills installed multiple saws working simultaneously. These were called gang mills. Later, the frames were replaced by bearings in a setup known as a muley saw.

One of the greatest advances in milling arrived with the invention of the steam engine. This allowed mills to be built anywhere, not just near a flowing waterway.

The next invention was the circular saw. Two circular saws, one at the top and the other at the bottom, were used to slice through larger logs. The invention increased output and reduced costs. By 1882, circular

Steam donkey

saws were used by 95 percent of lumber mills along the California coast.

Another invention was the bandsaw. The machinery was expensive, so only the largest mills used them.

Other wood products the mills generated were called splitstuff. This included grape stakes, pickets, fence and corral posts, railroad cross ties, cordwood, and rough-cut fire wood. The volume of splitstuff exceeded the amount of board lumber produced in the Santa Cruz Mountains and represented nearly half of all wood cut.

Moving the Mills. By default, lumber mill sites were in the forest near the trees being logged. Once a stand was depleted, which could take years, the mill operators moved their equipment to the next group of trees to be felled. Each mill was constructed with timber, boards, and shakes cut on the spot or carried from a previous mill. Even tramway and railroad tracks were moved.

The one part of a milling business that could not be moved was the millpond, a small body of water created by damming a nearby watercourse. The pond served to soak, sort, and store logs prior to cutting them into board feet.

Moving Lumber to Market. Milled wood was stored in a lumberyard and sorted and stacked by grade and size. A lumberjack used a jack to form the large stacks of cut boards.

Before any railroads were built through the Santa Cruz Mountains, horse-drawn wagons were used to move wood to market. A lumber wagon with a trailer pulled by teams of eight or more horses could haul up to 4000 board feet of lumber. The wobbly load made for a difficult balancing act.

Moving lumber by rail was more efficient. By the time the railroad left the Santa Cruz Mountains, gasoline-powered trucks came in to take their place.

Loma Prieta Town. When the Loma Prieta Lumber Company first moved into the Aptos Creek area, construction crews built crude housing and a spring-fed water tank. A few years later, in 1886, the town footprint expanded. Soon there was a general store, business office, post office, Wells Fargo Express station, telegraph office, train depot, saloon, dance hall, and a hotel.

Cottages were constructed for the workers and their families. Many had decorative landscaping and running water. Most of the 36 cottages were located on the east bank of Aptos Creek.

On the west bank of the creek, three more buildings were established. One was for the company president to use when he visited, and one became the summer home of the company secretary. The third structure was a company meeting hall and guest lodge for visiting directors. The Loma Prieta School District was formed and a schoolhouse was constructed. Additional water sources were developed with springs and wells.

After a destructive storm in 1899 that damaged the railroad, the town of Loma Prieta fell into decline. In 1901, the company moved its offices to San Francisco and Capitola. A year later, the post office and school closed, and commercial access by rail was abandoned. The location continued as a freight stop until the 1920s.

The Lumber Companies. The Loma Prieta Railroad, a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad, was incorporated in 1882. The same day, the Watsonville Mill and Lumber Company announced plans to log in the Aptos Creek area. The two companies worked together to reach their goals.

In early 1883, representatives of the Watsonville Mill and Lumber Company purchased 6,845 acres around Aptos Creek, Bridge Creek, and Hinckley Creek from Martina Castro's daughter. Here, they created the Loma Prieta Lumber Company to harvest the hard-to-reach redwood stands in the area. For their enterprise to be successful, they needed a rail line that ran through the property. The Southern Pacific Railroad agreed to finance construction of the Loma Prieta Railroad, including a seven-mile stretch into the Aptos Creek watershed as well as several spurs to reach multiple mill sites. The cost was estimated at $50,000 per mile.

The Loma Prieta Lumber Company opened its doors in 1884 and connected by rail to two other nearby mill sites, Molino and Monte Vista. At its peak, the company employed over 200 men and 80 contractors who were paid an average rate of $2.25 per day plus board. The entire operation was the largest of its time. The mills produced as much as 70,000 board feet of lumber in an 11-hour workday.

To accomplish this level of output, the Monte Vista mill used two 50-foot long band saws and multiple circular saws. A devastating fire destroyed the Monte Vista Mill in 1885. The owners built back a smaller operation at the site, and erected a new facility at Pajaro near an existing rail line. In 1886, the company expanded operations near the Molina site with another bridge, millpond, rail spurs, and a new mill.

The new Monte Vista mill included worker cottages, a store, company offices and living quarters, a Wells Fargo Express, and a telegraph office. Tourist accommodations included a campground, picnic area, a small

saloon and hotel, and a dance pavilion.

The post-Civil War economy fell into recession in 1893. Milling operations shut down from 1892 to 1893 to allow for equipment upgrades. With construction stalled and a backlogged inventory, the company considered their options.

In 1894, the owners merged with the F.A. Hihn Company, that was logging near Valencia Creek. The combined firm was called the Santa Cruz Lumber Company. Storm damage in 1899 prevented the Santa Cruz Lumber Company from turning a profit and it dissolved not long after the storm. Both the F.A. Hihn and the Loma Prieta Lumber Company divided their assets and continued separately.

In 1900, the Loma Prieta Lumber Company shifted their logging efforts to Hinckley Gulch and wound down their operations on Aptos Creek. A massive storm destroyed the mill at Hinckley Gulch in early 1906. The 1906 earthquake just a few months later caused significant damage throughout the area. Operations were paused briefly.

The 1906 earthquake spurred a need for lumber as towns started to rebuild, especially in San Francisco. In 1908, the Loma Prieta Lumber Company decided to pull the logs from Hinckley Gulch to the former Loma Prieta site and reestablish milling operations there. At that time, the site was no longer a town, but rail service was still available for hauling lumber to market. From 1910 to 1915 a subsidiary of the Loma Prieta Lumber Company, the Molino Timber Company, operated the mill at Loma Prieta.

In 1915, the operations at Loma Prieta were completely dismantled, including the millpond. Plans to rebuild rose again in 1917, when the Loma Prieta Lumber Company regained ownership of the land surrounding Loma Prieta. Once more the company rebuilt its mill with a plan to process timber from Bridge Creek. Unfortunately, another destructive storm struck the area just one year later which wiped out the Bridge Creek infrastructure. The Loma Prieta Lumber Company set its sights on Big Tree Gulch.

The Big Tree Gulch operation turned out to be difficult and limited. The last full season of harvesting was in 1920. The Aptos Creek mill was permanently shut down in 1922. The narrow-gauge line was removed and the company was mortgaged to pay off its debts, that they settled through land sales just five years later. By the end of 1924, the Loma Prieta Lumber Company had produced an astonishing 140 million board feet of redwood. The Loma Prieta Branch of the Southern Pacific Railroad ceased operations in 1925.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, the Loma Prieta Lumber Company continued small timber operations in the Aptos Creek watershed through leases and other contracts. Lawrence Cusack launched two mills near Buzzard's Lagoon to harvest some of the larger trees that had been left. He ran operations there from 1936 into the 1940s.

In 1942, large-scale logging came to an end in the Augmentation after some 22,529 acres were cut. Over 800 million board feet of lumber was harvested and cut into timber products between 1865 and 1942.

In 1948, Union Oil searched for petroleum in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Sand Point and White's Lagoon. They drilled two exploratory wells but never found enough oil. This piqued the interest of the Marks family.

Forest Preservation. Some people took note of the extensive destruction caused by over-logging and started talking about conservation. Congress established the United States Forest Service in 1897.

Nissen and Benjamin Marks moved to Salinas in the mid-1880s as farmers. They had four children: Alice, Agnes, Herman, and Andrew. Benjamin died in 1893 and Alice in 1942. Nissen and her children had an interest in nature and started buying land in the Augmentation. Her son Herman hoped they would find oil. By 1954, the Marks family owned 9,970 acres in the mountains above Aptos, that formerly belonged to the Loma Prieta Lumber Company. Nissen Marks died in 1955.

In 1957, Herman Marks conducted exploratory oil drilling near Aptos Creek, probably between Molina and the Porter house. No significant amounts of oil were located. As the family debts rose, they looked for alternatives. In 1961, the Marks family offered to sell their land to the California State Parks for just over $400,000. The state rejected the offer due to lack of funds.

In 1959, the Nature Conservancy was established as a non-profit in California. After the land sale to the state fell through, Herman Marks made a pitch to the non-profit to create a public park. In 1962, the Nature Conservancy purchased over 9,000 acres to preserve the site. They named the park after the family matriarch, but spelled it in what her children thought was the easiest format, Nisene Marks.

In June of 1965, after a bond measure to create a new state park passed, the State of California acquired the land deed from the Nature Conservancy. They paid about $625,000 to pay off the non-profit's debt. The Marks children donated additional parcels to make the total acreage 9,815 acres. The land became Forest of Nisene Marks State Park.

In the 1970s, a 2,700 acre parcel adjacent to and north of the Forest of Nisene Marks was logged by several companies including Pelican Timber Company. Pelican ran into financial difficulties and agreed to a debt-for-nature land swap with the State of California and the Bank of America. This deal led to the creation of the Soquel Demonstration State Forest (SDSF) in 1988. The forest was managed by the Nature Conservancy until it was transferred to Cal Fire in 1990.

The Forest of Nisene Marks continues to protect the redwood forests of the our mountains.