
Drawbridge: A Ghost Town Revisited

By John Steiner



Photo courtesy of Irene Dollin

Back in 1876, the United States was one hundred years old and Ulysses S. Grant was President. California had been a state for 26 years, the Civil War had been over for eleven, and the San Francisco Bay Area was prospering. Its economy was primarily agrarian and the work force was composed of farmers, blacksmiths, and wheelwrights, rather than the software engineers and manufacturing technicians that make up the modern labor force. On average, one male in twenty-five could expect to live to age sixty (women lived shorter lives due to complications from childbirth). The Bay Area population, estimated at 266,000 people during the 1870 census, was expanding outward from San Francisco and Oakland, aided by the new Transcontinental Railroad which brought passengers swiftly from Omaha to Alameda in a matter of days.

Other railroads began serving this growing population. The South Pacific Coast Transportation Company, chartered in 1876, provided a rail link between Newark and Santa Cruz to transport redwood lumber, fruit, quicksilver, and passengers across the Santa Cruz Mountains. A financial success from the very beginning, the South Pacific Coast Railroad extended to Alameda in 1879, which provided it with a link to the Transcontinental Railroad. The new, narrow-gauge railroad ran the eighty miles from Webster Street in Alameda to Gharkeys Wharf in Santa Cruz in three hours and fifty-five minutes for three dollars and fifty cents one-way.

The route that the South Pacific Coast Railroad followed was the most direct possible – it hugged the east shore of the bay, and crossed many miles of intertidal salt marsh. Barriers were presented by Warm Springs Slough (now known as Mud Slough) and Coyote Slough, both navigable waterways that provided boat access to Warm Springs Landing, a busy, commercial wharf miles inland from the Bay itself. Crossing these sloughs with

conventional railroad bridges would block these important waterways to boat traffic and thereby violate United States federal law. Railroad management circumvented the difficulty by building swing-truss drawbridges across the two sloughs, with a bridge-tender's cabin on the island between Station Island, as the place became known, was recognized as a prime waterfowl resting place where ducks and geese were abundant.

By 1880, the South Pacific Coast Railroad had two trains stopping at Station Island on Sundays, so that duck hunters would have ready access to first-rate salt marsh. As hunting parties grew bigger and stayed on the island longer, the railroad set up a baggage car for free accommodations. Soon, building materials began arriving on the train, along with the increasing hunter population, and makeshift shelters sprouted on Station Island.

The first permanent house was built in 1894. Louis Holden, who lived in it, remembered trains arriving on Friday night and Saturday with two hundred or more hunters. They would stay in various shacks and shelters on the island, and depart on the Sunday night train. In 1902, the Sprung Hotel was built (and would stand until a 1968 windstorm). The Hunter's Home Hotel followed, as did a permanent train station built by Southern Pacific, the new owner of the railroad. There were around forty buildings, including a water tower that serviced the steam locomotives. The cluster of buildings was called "Drawbridge" by now, and appeared on the Southern Pacific schedule.

By 1906, Drawbridge had seventy buildings, many of which were private residences. Everyone there hunted the abundant waterfowl, and duck clubs – rustic and not-so-rustic cabins – predominated at the north end of the island. As the years went by, the population grew and grew, attracted to the area by pristine salt marshes and its wildlife. Artesian wells provided fresh water, 'was as clean and clear as the best water anywhere,' remembers former resident Irene Dollin.

The shrimp industry, which had begun San Francisco Bay in 1870, developed rapidly around Station Island. Market shrimp



Drawbridge Residents at the station, 1904

flourished by the millions in the sloughs, and provided the means by which California became the main shrimp-producing state in 1880. Oysters were big, too. The Virginia oyster, brought to California via the Transcontinental Railroad, became the single most valuable commercial fishing stock in the state. Numerous oyster beds were planted in the sloughs around Station Island.

Meanwhile, the party crowd convened at the Hunter's Home Hotel, "a combination hotel, dance hall, private residence, boat house and bar"* located along Coyote Slough at the south end of the island. When Prohibition came along, the south end acquired a reputation for drinking and gambling. It was known about some of the female employees that their hearts were not only worn on their sleeves, but could be won at the roulette table or rented outright. Coyote Slough is the county line, with Drawbridge being located just outside of Santa Clara County. Despite the rumors of disreputable activities in Drawbridge, the Santa Clara County Sheriff never crossed that line (at least not while on duty).

By 1926, five passenger trains a day served Drawbridge, and the train station had a telephone. The hotel owners and employees, the bridge tenders, the shrimpers and oyster cultivators, families, and a host of hardy residents who commuted by train to jobs in San Jose, Newark or Oakland lived on the island year around. During duck season, the population swelled with hunters so that the town of Drawbridge became known as one of the Fremont area's six communities.

The peak of Drawbridge's history occurred during the 1920s. About one hundred buildings, erected on pilings, were connected to each other by boardwalks. The resident population of over two hundred people doubled when duck hunters and weekend visitors came to town and stayed in the hotels and duck clubs.

It must have been close to heaven on earth. There was wildlife galore, plenty of solitude, clean water, clean air and loads of fish, shrimp, oysters, or ducks for the table. Its economy was directly dependent upon the surrounding tidal salt marsh, which provided the waterfowl, the shrimp, the oysters, the fish, and the solitude.

As early as 1800, it had been discovered that shallow, barren, naturally occurring ponds in the salt marsh filled with salty bay water at high tide and dried out during late summer, leaving a layer of natural salt. In 1852 the Crystal Salt Works, established at Mayhew's Landing near Newark, became the first commercial attempt to capitalize on this natural phenomenon. In 1854, levees were built to increase the size of these ponds. By 1862, ponds had increased to as large as twenty acres, and numerous salt companies began harvesting salt. The Leslie Salt Refining Company formed in 1901 and began consolidating these many individual companies, finally becoming the Leslie Salt Company. It would ultimately manage 20,000 acres of salt ponds in the South Bay. Many years later, it would become a division of Cargill Incorporated.

During all of this, the Bay Area population exploded. From about a quarter-million people when Drawbridge began, the population had grown to three million by the 1950s. Most of these people lived close to the Bay, many in areas that had been reclaimed from salt marsh. Their roads, airports, factories, and landfills had displaced additional marsh. Their effluent waste, much of it untreated, flowed into the bay and poisoned the mud-dwelling organisms. The oysters and other filter-feeders either perished or became unfit to eat, and the shrimping industry died out. The waterfowl, dependent upon unspoiled salt marsh, declined as salt ponds encroached upon Drawbridge. The advancing human population turned the village from a remote, rural hamlet into an urban outpost within hearing of, and in plain view of ever-nearer industry. Station Island itself became the site of two gigantic salt ponds, with Drawbridge sandwiched between on a slender strand of remaining marsh along the railroad tracks.

The town itself began sinking. Pumping of groundwater from the Santa Clara Valley and the East Bay over the last century had caused settling of the surface above. The Alviso Yacht Club, a few miles due south of Drawbridge, sank ten meters. Station Island did likewise. As the island slowly subsided, its buildings, erected on pilings sunk deep into the island mud, were pulled down with it. High tides have washed over the island every day since, leaving behind a layer of silt that continuously forms a new surface layer, complete with new marsh vegetation. The surface of Station Island stays in the same place, while the town of Drawbridge is pulled down below it.

As a result of habitat loss, pollution, urban sprawl and subsidence, the economy of Drawbridge was ruined, the residents began moving away, the duck hunters stopped



Drawbridge and surrounding area

visiting and the future of the town was hopeless. The population slid from a high of several hundred to several dozen. By 1960, there were only four or five permanent residents.

At first a seemingly endless habitat with limitless resources, San Francisco Bay's salt marsh was used, then exploited and degraded, and largely destroyed. The village of Drawbridge, which depended for its survival on those marshes, was abandoned. In 1972, Station Island was acquired by the U.S. Government as part of San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. Natural salt marsh along the edge of San Francisco Bay had shrunk to about ten percent of what it had once been, and the Refuge was established to reverse the decline. The last resident moved away in 1979, making Drawbridge a ghost town. Since that time the buildings have steadily decayed, and a visitor now would scarcely recognize the sinking, relict rooftops as the homes that once stood there.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has no plans to restore the old town. Rather, the objective is to allow the old structures to slowly sink away and disappear, and allow the salt marsh to reclaim the area. The levees impounding the salt ponds on Station Island will ultimately be breached, the tides will wash over the former ponds, and salt marsh will reestablish itself.

The people of Drawbridge loved the marsh and lived in Drawbridge to get away from the outside world, to enjoy the abundant wildlife, to experience the beauty of extensive wetlands. Though few of them are still living, it is hard to imagine that any would object to the Fish and Wildlife Service's strategy for marsh restoration. It is time to continue the metaphor of Drawbridge to a positive conclusion. It is time to reverse the trend that spelled the end of the old town, and to replace Drawbridge with the marsh and the wildlife that enabled the town to be born in the first place.

**Excerpt taken from:*

"Ghost Town in Suburbia." Palo Alto Times. 9-10 Nov. 1967, Peninsula Living Supplement: (6).

John Steiner worked at Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge for close to two decades, met and interviewed many of the former residents of Drawbridge, and led over one hundred tours of the old ghost town.

