Living by the Sea

A History of Central Coast Citizens' Reliance on the Ocean

Notes and excerpts from California State Parks publication

December 3, 2020

For centuries, the ocean has remained the iconic centerpiece of the Central Coast. From trade to agriculture and everything in between, residents of the Central Coast have long relied on the Pacific Ocean for survival. Let's take a closer look at this history.

Early Beginnings

Layout of the Central Coast from Point San Luis to Ragged Point, Circa 1948 (USGS)

Thousands of years ago, before the Central Coast was subject to Spanish or American influence, Chumash and Salinan tribes made up the entirety of the human population

Abalone Shell Container similar to those crafted by Chumash and Salinan tribes
The Fowler Museum at UCLA

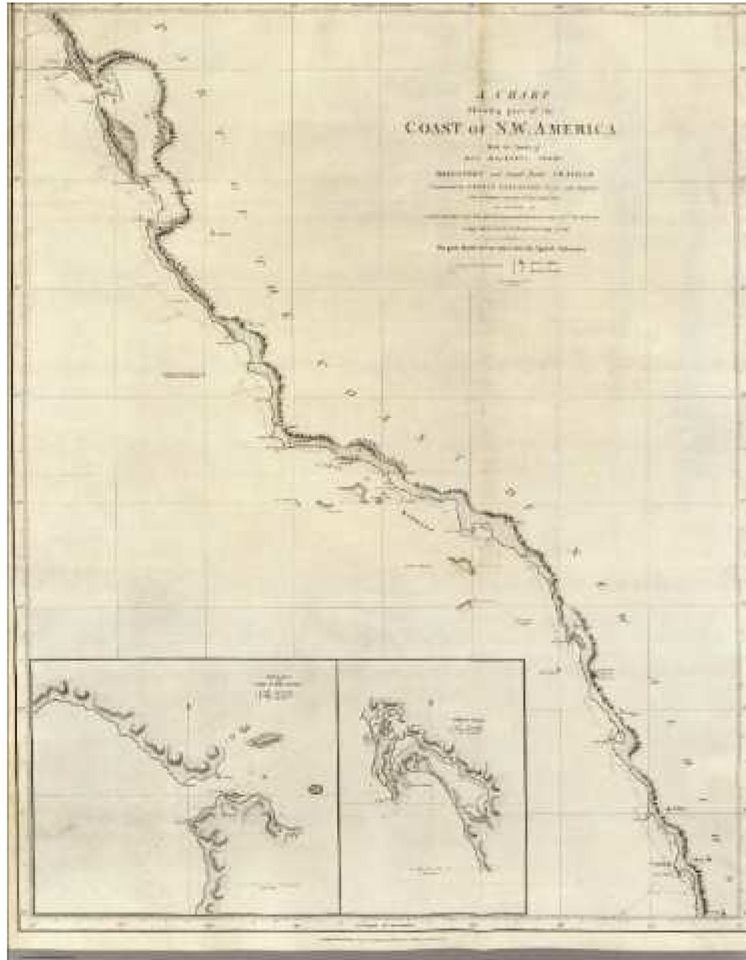
A strong majority of Chumash and Salinan tribes lived by the Central Coast in order to sustain their constant reliability on the ocean and its vast resources. The ocean was used for harvesting seaweed, hunting marine mammals like seals, and repurposing wildlife, like the abalone shell container seen above.

A sandstone pestle created by the Chumash to grind material
The Fowler Museum at UCLA

In addition to utilizing the ocean directly, these groups also used many plants for survival. Coastal plants by marshes and estuaries were utilized to weave baskets and duck traps, while sandstone was carved into objects like pestles in order to mash fruit and other materials (above).

The Chumash and Salinans made use of these sustainable oceanic practices to live along the Central Coast for thousands of years, until the colonization by the Spanish between the 18th and 19th centuries brought upon drastic consequences.

A New Influence



Fresh Faces

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo

In 1542, Spanish explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo visits the Central Coast. Cabrillo spends days exploring what he dubs "El Moro" (Morro Bay).

Nearly two-hundred years after, the Portolá expedition begins a near century-long period of Spanish reign in California, devastating local Chumash and Salinan populations with new diseases.

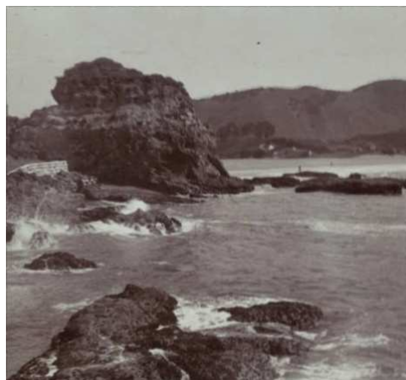
Seal hunting, circa 1940s (Black Gold Cooperative Library System)

As the Spanish began to monopolize trade along the California coast, agriculture and hunting industries boomed.

By the early 1800s, cattle ranching and sea otter hunting became the most profitable industries on the coastline.

Trade-Off

As trading exploded, the Spanish took full control of major trading ports like Los Angeles and San Diego, banning Americans from trading there.



Avila Port, circa 1905 (USC Digital Library)

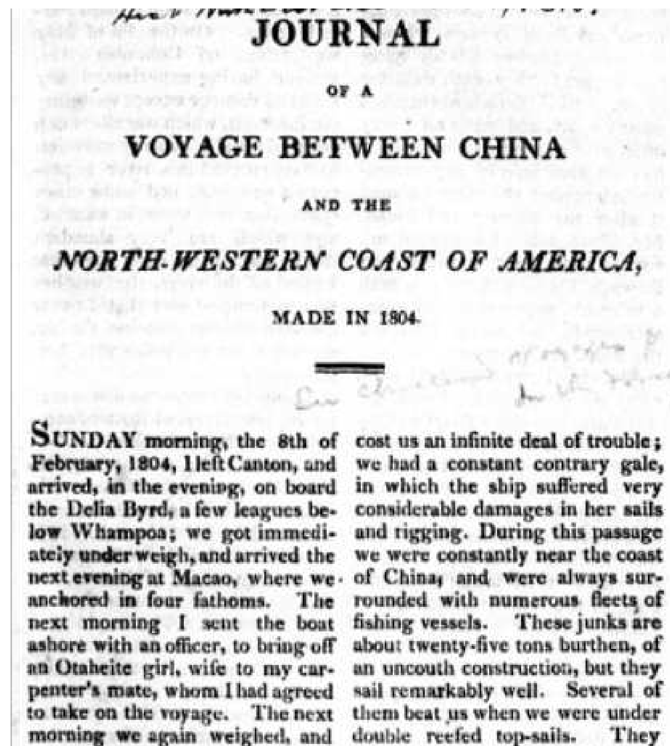
As a result, less monitored ports in smaller towns, like Port San Luis Obispo, became hot spots for trading between foreign and local merchants.

Coastal hunting destroyed sea otter populations while also skyrocketing trade, with hundreds of ships visiting California after 1800.

Since the Central Coast was relatively untouched by authorities, the ports of the area also served well as contraband trade destinations.

Spooner's Cove, previously known as a doghole port (Highway 1 Discovery Route)

These locations, known as doghole ports, boosted small deals of private trade. Contraband flourished as these ports were very small and secluded.



JOURNAL

OF A

VOYAGE BETWEEN CHINA

AND THE

NORTH-WESTERN COAST OF AMERICA,

MADE IN 1804.

SUNDAY morning, the 8th of February, 1804, I left Canton, and arrived, in the evening, on board the Delia Byrd, a few leagues below Whampoa; we got immediately under weigh, and arrived the next evening at Macao, where we anchored in four fathoms. The next morning I sent the boat ashore with an officer, to bring off an Otaheite girl, wife to my carpenter's mate, whom I had agreed to take on the voyage. The next morning we again weighed, and

cost us an infinite deal of trouble; we had a constant contrary gale, in which the ship suffered very considerable damages in her sails and rigging. During this passage we were constantly near the coast of China, and were always surrounded with numerous fleets of fishing vessels. These junks are about twenty-five tons burthen, of an uncouth construction, but they sail remarkably well. Several of them beat us when we were under double reefed top-sails. They

One trader in particular, Captain William Shaler, greatly helped increase American influence along the Central Coast. Initially run out of San Diego by the Spanish, Shaler took his ship north to San Luis Obispo.

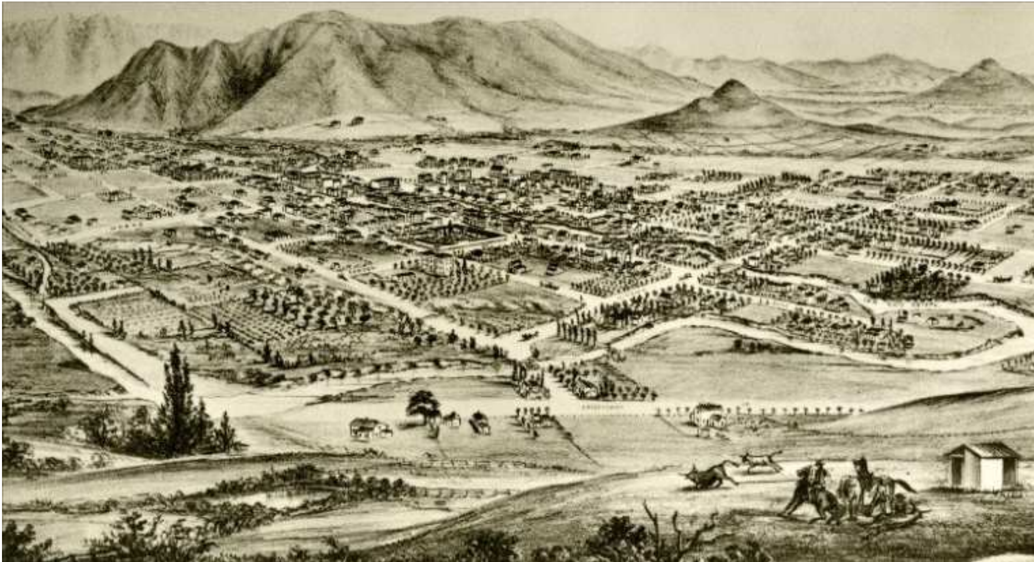
Captain William Shaler

Despite the fact that Shaler was not well received by the locals, he greatly influenced the local trade, saying:

"We got plentiful supplies of provisions as usual and were not unsuccessful in our collection of furs"

Shaler's report of successful trade along the Central Coast created an influx of international commerce, leading many to invest in local economy.

California's cattle and otter industries would remain popular for years, until disasters and miracles alike created an entirely new landscape.



San Luis Obispo, 1877 (Black Gold Cooperative Library System / Santa Barbara Public Library)

Paradigm Shifts

By 1848, Alta California was on the cusp of a series of events that would forever change it.

Jackpot!

In early January of 1848, gold reserves were hit for the first time at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, CA.

Sutter's Mill in 1848
(Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley)

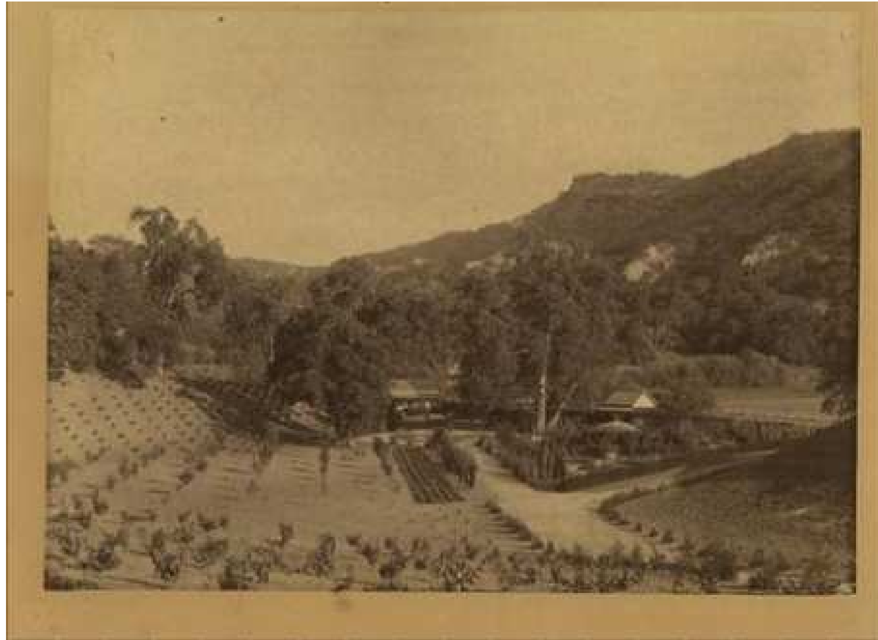
As a result, the official "Gold Rush" begun, and settlers from all sides of the world came as fast as possible to capitalize on the moment.

The rapid success of the Gold Rush brought a booming economy to California, and its admission as an American state in 1850 only further enticed immigrants to explore the California landscape.

Citizen's at Portsmouth Square celebrating the admission of California into the U.S.
(California Historical Society)

Milked Dry

As the Gold Rush hit its stride, the cattle ranching industry of San Luis Obispo County was still in full swing.



Ranch in San Luis Obispo County, date unknown
(Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives)

Ranchers with property that stretched all the way to the coastline were the wealthiest land owners on the Central Coast.

By the early 1860s, however, the cattle ranching industry had taken a turn for the worse, impacted by one of the costliest droughts in California history.

Mission San Miguel in 1864, with dying cattle featured in the background
(The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

Over the course of a few years, hot winds and grasshopper infestations ravaged the Central Coast landscape, killing many cattle.

With the cattle ranching industry in shambles, the Central Coast was in dire need of new industries to sustain the economy.

Ex-cattle ranchers soon began to make the switch to dairy farming, with most having 20-25 dairy cows by 1865.

Say Cheese!

With the influx of immigrants that came over to the now-ended Gold Rush, the opportunity was perfect to still capitalize on the California landscape.

Second generation Swiss-Italian immigrants in Sonoma County
(Courtesy of Sonoma County Library, photograph 035032)

European immigrants, primarily of Swiss-Italian descent, moved down to the Central Coast and integrated themselves into the growing dairy industry.

The Swiss were already notorious for their dairy industry prowess in Marin and Sonoma counties.

Dairy cows in Sonoma County
(Courtesy of Sonoma County Library, photograph 002596)

One Swiss immigrant in particular, Joseph Fiscalini, became one of the earliest residents of the Central Coast to ignite the Swiss dairy boom.

Morgan Brians's Dairy, 1883 (Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives)

Arriving to the Central Coast in 1876, Fiscalini initially worked as a cow milker for Cambria resident Morgan Brians. Fiscalini would milk up to thirty cows twice a day, often working in harsher climates for little pay.

Green Valley, Cambria

After two years' time with Morgan Brians, Joseph Fiscalini finally worked up enough money to fund his own dairy farming operation.

Alongside his friend John Filiponni, Fiscalini leased out land owned by the Hearst family in Green Valley to produce products like milk, butter, and cheese. After a year had passed, they made a net profit of $2000 ($52,056 in 2020 USD). After Filiponni's unexpected death in 1879, Fiscalini continued the operation on his own.

After his success, hundreds of Swiss-Italians came to live alongside the coast, prioritizing in cheese and butter from 1870-1900.

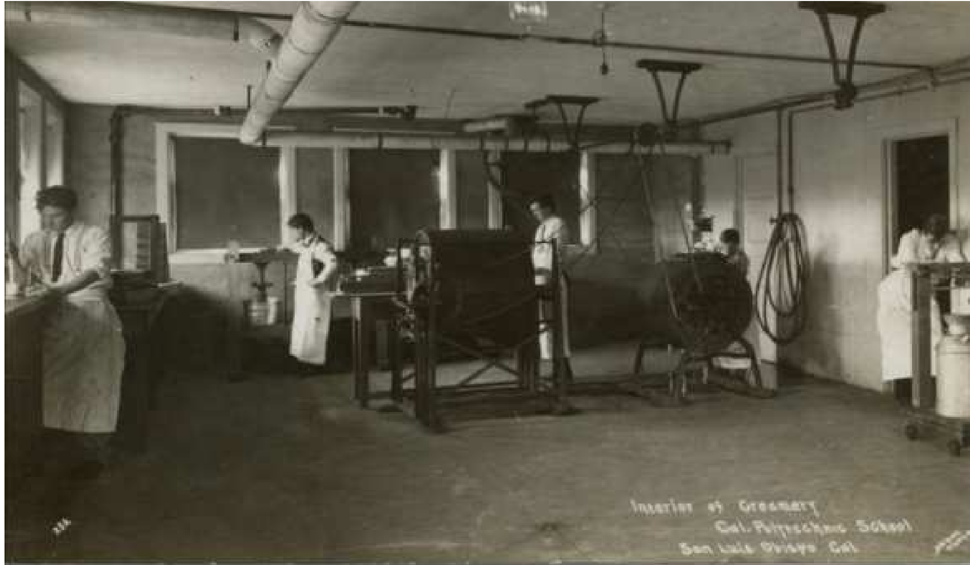
Immigrants Arriving.

At the present time there is a great influx of immigrants, principally Swiss, who are settling in the dairy country from Old Creek to Cambria. They all come with some ready money to enable them to start in on a cash basis. There is already a large settlement of these hardy Alpine mountaineers in and around Cambria, who are fast becoming rich in the dairy business. The Steele

1875 excerpt in the San Luis Obispo Tribune commenting on the high influx of dairy farming Swiss immigrants (California Digital Newspaper Collection, University of California, Riverside)

Teamwork

After much success, many dairy operations teamed up to form cooperatives. The first in SLO County was established between the Cambria and Home Creameries in 1894.



Creamery operation at Cal Poly, circa 1908 (Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives)

This operation was successful until 1904, when a fire that tore through the county burned both creameries to the ground.

Improvements of coastal travel inspired others to reignite dairy cooperatives. In 1907, businessman M.G. Salmina established the second dairy cooperative in SLO County with the Harmony Valley Creamery Association.

Cal Poly students churning butter. Cal Poly would later become an asset of the Harmony Valley Creamery Association (Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives)

The Harmony Valley Creamery Association was extremely successful. By 1914, the HVCA had produced 238,000 lbs of butter and 113,000 lbs of cheese.

Challenge Butter distribution facotry, 1900s

In fact, the HVCA garnered such a large reputation in California, that in 1915 it became a supplier of the nationally-known Challenge Butter Company.

This greatly boosted the reputation of SLO County dairy, and the HVCA's membership would grow steadily for decades to follow, eventually peaking at 400 members in 1936.

Cattle grazing on a beach in California, 1900
(USC Digital Library / California Historical Society)

Deadliest Catch

Swiss-Italians were not the only European immigrants that left a large impact on the Central Coast economy.

In the 1860s, Portuguese immigrants started investing in what would become the first (and last) whaling industry on the Central Coast.

Whaling operation in Moss Landing, Monterey County (Online Archive of California)

In 1863, Portuguese immigrant Machado, known as "Joseph Clark", moved down to San Simeon Point after developing heavy notoriety for his whaling skills in Monterey.

San Simeon Pier (Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives)

Clark purchased 12 acres of land and created a whaling station nearly identical to his previous station in Monterey. Clark turned significant profit between 1864-1867 due to a completely untapped market.

"Removing Blubber of First Whale at Moss Landing" (Online Archive of California)

With these funds, Clark was able to purchase plenty of updated equipment. This included new boats with harpoon guns, 200-gallon rendering vats to refine whale blubber, and a wharf to handle captured whales.
Whalers used two, 30-foot long boats to chase after whales. Using harpoons and bombs, these whales were killed and dragged back to the wharf at San Simeon.

The process that Clark and his small team went through to attain blubber was both intricate and tedious. Teams of six and seven whalers would work from night to day looking out for whales. Once found, they would signal the other whalers by waving a flag and yelling "Whale, ho!"

Beached whale, San Simon, early 20th Century (Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives)

Due to limited resources, Clark's team had to use what they could to refine the whale blubber. This blubber was often melted in the vats using fires sparked by nearby driftwood. When the blubber was fully boiled down and refined, it was shipped out of San Simeon Point via barrels and passed along to San Francisco. After producing over 500 barrels of oil from 14 whales in 1879, the operation remained majorly successful for the decades, raking in thousands.

Clark's operations slowly became dry as the whale population subsided. Business declined, and in 1891, Clark died. His property was purchased by the Hearst family, and whaling slowly fizzled out until ending permanently in 1914.

Influence from Across the Pacific

While the dairy and whaling industries were unquestionably booming, European immigrants were not the only newcomers to seize opportunity on the Central Coast.

Immigrants arriving at Angel Island, San Francisco (California State Library)

Immigrants from the Pacific too came over in large numbers from the Gold Rush onward, taking advantage of the booming economy as well. Beginning in the early 1850s, Chinese immigrants first began to settle in the United States, first arriving at Angel Island in San Francisco.

Taiping Rebellion (Beijing University)

Their reasons for arriving varied, but many came because of a desire for capitalizing on gold and a concurrent desire to flee the raging Taiping Rebellion.

Throughout the 1850s, many Chinese realized that they would need to look in industries past the Gold Rush in order to provide a sustainable living.

Chinese Railroad workers circa 1865 (Black Gold Cooperative Library System)

By the 1860s, many Chinese immigrants slowly made their way down the coastline, settling into SLO County by the mid 1860s.

Larry Oglesby Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont

Once arriving in the county, Chinese families sought to take advantage of the coastline by taking up various forms of farming.

China Harbor, one of many ranching locations co-inhabited by Chinese farmers (Google)

These families rented out small spaces by the direct coastline from local ranchers, often paying as little as $1/year for rent.

Coastal Delicacies

Early on, the Chinese made multiple discoveries that were crucial to what would become booming Central Coast industries.

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Abalone shellls, Morro Bay
(Larry Oglesby Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library.)

The discovery and commercialization of coastal abalone and seaweed in the late 1860s provided the Chinese with a sustainable living that would go relatively unchallenged for decades. The amount of abalone along the Central Coast in the 1860s was "seemingly infinite", with American nationals having zero interest in consuming the shellfish.

Abalone fishing village in Santa Monica, circa 1905 (USC Digital Library)

Abalone was viewed as a delicacy for the wealthy in China, so Chinese immigrants quickly jumped at the bit to fish the animal and export it to the Chinese mainland. Notably, this marked the first time since the Chumash and Salinans that abalone was widely captured on the Central Coast.

20th Century driftwood cabin owned by seaweed farmer How Wong

All the while, seaweed farming on the Central Coast was equally untapped, leading to many Chinese families building cabins out of driftwood along their costal rental properties. Between Cayucos and San Simeon, dozens of Chinese immigrants farmed what is known as *ulva*, a specific type of edible seaweed found near exclusively within the Central Coast.

Despite difficult communication between farmers and traders due to language barriers, abalone and seaweed were initially successful.

Seaweed farmer George Lum, San Luis Obispo County, 20th Century (Dolores K. Young)

Though neither industry was well documented in its early days, an 1869 record of a "Chinese Product" (possibly ulva or abalone) shipped out of San Simeon Point for $3000, indicating that these businesses turned a respectable profit.

Though not interfering with other pre-existing local businesses, rampant anti-Chinese sentiments plagued the state from the 1870s onward.

By the 1880s, racist sentiments reached a pinnacle, and several Chinese exclusion acts prohibited immigration and incoming trade. Commerce went quiet, and for a while, the Chinese abalone and seaweed farming industries had reached a halt.

Resurgence

After two decades of silence, abalone would once again resurface in popularity in the late 1890s with the arrival of Japanese immigrants.

Sparked by a Japanese woodcutter's rediscovery of the shellfish in Monterey County, word of abalone made its way to the Japanese government.

Japanese abalone fishermen in San Pedro (USC Digital Library)

With foreign assistance, Japanese settlers expanded abalone fishing operations across the Central Coast. Using more rigorous farming methods, they gathered abalone in much deeper waters at a much higher rate.

By 1899, nearly 370,000 pounds of abalone were fished statewide by the Japanese, the majority of which were farmed along the Central Coast.

Abalone farming harbor, San Pedro (USC Digital Library)

Similar to the Chinese just two decades ago, tensions grew over the Japanese success across the state, and many politicians enacted laws limiting the capacity of Japanese fishing.

MONTEREY, Aug. 6.—The Board of Trustees of the city of Monterey has adopted a resolution asking the County Supervisors to adopt an ordinance prohibiting the shipping of abalone or abalone shells out of Monterey County for a term of years. The resolution had its origin in the fear that the present excess of abalone fishing may cause the extermination of the abalone in these waters. A Japanese company, with headquarters at Carmel Bay, has during the past year shipped to Japan nearly forty tons of dried abalone.

San Francisco Call article describing legislation on abalone, 1899
(California Digital Newspaper Collection, University of Califonia, Riverside)

Despite this, the only law that adversely affected Japanese business in San Luis Obispo county was a 1901 state mandate requiring farmed abalone reach a circumference of 15 inches.

Abalone racks, Cayucos, 1910 (San Luis Obispo Historical Society)

As a result, abalone farming in areas like Cayucos and San Simeon continued to flourish, remaining successful for decades onward.

Not a Job, a Lifestyle

During the time that the Japanese spent capitalizing off abalone, Chinese citizens were permitted to export products to China without the assistance of Chinese traders arriving in the bay first.

20th Century seaweed farming cabin, located between Cayucos and San Simeon

The Chinese seaweed farmers who lived between San Simeon and Cayucos had not left since trade was restricted, still living in coastal cabins.

While some were second-generation seaweed farmers, other newcomers arrived to the coast directly from China, expanding the seaweed industry.

One of these new immigrants was a seaweed farmer named How Wong.

Wong lived along the coast for decades, building a cabin between Estero Bluffs and Harmony Headlands to farm seaweed with his wife, Shook Hing.

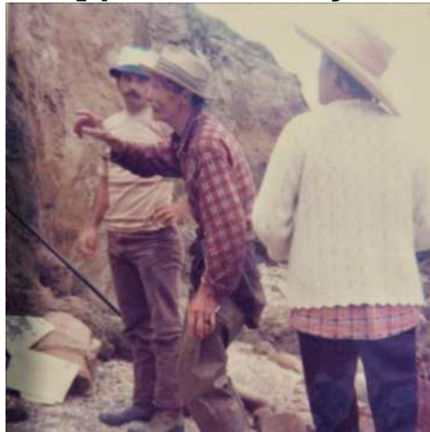
Rocks where How Wong cultivated *ulva,* a species of seaweed

How Wong carrying baskets of ulva

The process of cultivating seaweed was somewhat of an art form. How Wong would take lumber scraps and a kerosene torch to set fire to the coastal rocks until only ulva remained. After only ulva grew on the rocks, How Wong and his cultivators swam out to the rocks and sliced the seaweed off by hand. The wet seaweed was placed into baskets and carried up the cliffside to flat land.

Bill Martony, How Wong's "#1 Son"

"How Wong would have a bamboo pole and two baskets on either side. [He was] phenomenally strong."



From left to right: Bill Martony, How Wong, Shook Hing

Up to 80 pounds of ulva was picked off the rocks and set to dry in 2' x 2' squares called called "neats" on the flat land. These squares of seaweed would dry out over the course of several days, becoming 15% of their original weight, and packed into napsacks.

Shook Hing laying out ulva into neats.

Couple along the rocky shore.

After the seaweed was packed, How Wong would transport it to the Bay Area and eventually China. Initially, this seaweed traveled only by boat via the San Simeon wharf, but towards the end of his life, Wong traveled by car to deliver the ulva himself.

Little market competition allowed farmers like Wong to maintain their lifestyle for years. Wong and Shook Hing, like many other seaweed farmers at the time, made just enough off exports to self-sustain. A small market allowed farmers like Wong to maintain a simplistic cabin lifestyle for years.

***"[It was] a chapter in history that we could never repeat again; that we were lucky enough to be in the right place and the right time."* Bill Martony**

Surf and Turf

While sea agricultural was popular, the coastline also remained home to on-land farming as well.

Nagano family, 1921 (Black Gold Cooperative System)

Japanese farmers, most importantly the Nagano and Eto families, took control of much coastal agriculture in the early 20th century. Specializing in row crops, both families established a great deal of Central Coast agriculture in the Los Osos Valley.

Flower seed, peas, beans, and artichoke were just a few of the crops grown annually. Japanese, along with Filipino, immigrants spent days picking crops in the fields.

Filipino farmers picking lettuce, Morro Bay, 1930 (Black Gold Cooperative System)

Innovation was prevalent as well. By the 1930's, farmer George Nagano became one of the first farmers to introduce avocado crops on the Central Coast.

Both families had connections that allowed their crops to be sold statewide.

Farmer's Market, San Francisco, 1934
(SAN FRANCISCO HISTORY CENTER, SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY)

After cultivation, much of the agriculture went north to San Francisco, where it was sold at farmer's markets.

The Japanese held even more influence over the local market.

Watanabe Market, 1920-1930 (San Luis Obispo History Center)

Much of the crops produced by the Naganos and Etos would also be sold at the once-standing Watanabe Market in San Luis Obispo.

By the late 1930's, the Japanese held a major footing on the entire agriculture industry between Morro Bay and Cayucos.

Eto Farm, circa 1930 (Black Gold Cooperative System)

To protect produce prices, Tameji Eto established the South Central Japanese Agricultural Association. While this unionization did help protect prices, it would not last long.

By 1942, anti-Japanese sentiments and the establishment of interment camps in WWII would alter every Japanese farming family. Once again, the Central Coast was to experience changes that would alter it forever.

Later Years

A Time Gone

The current landscape of the Central Coast is vastly different from that of the pre-World War II era.

Japanese tenant farmers took a sharp decline after the installation of internment camps.

Japanese and Filipino workers on the Nagano Farm, 1921
(Black Gold Cooperative System)

As many were forcibly removed from their homes, they, and the many Filipino fieldworkers who assisted them, soon became out of employment and a living space.

George, Nellie, Ellen, Patrick and William Nagano : Morro Bay. 1929. Calisphere,

Though many families never returned to the Central Coast, some like the Nagano family were able to retain their homes post war. These families continue to live along the coastline today, farming strawberries, artichokes, and more.

After the 1949 Communist Revolution in China, many trade routes between itself and the United States were severed, severely damaging the seaweed industry.

Though it survived for many years, seaweed farming slowly tailed off until How Wong became the sole seaweed farmer. While attempts have been made to revitalize the industry, seaweed farming has not existed along the coastline since How Wong's death in 1975.

Abalone farming followed a similar fate. Only few farming operations still exist near Cayucos, with the majority of Japanese families pursuing different industries contemporarily.

The same cannot be said about the dairy industry, which still holds a small footing on the Central Coast. Though not ran entirely by Swiss-Italians anymore, inland dairies from Paso Robles to Cal Poly University create tons of milk and butter yearly.