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SITE of the LIGHTER WHARF at BOLINAS

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by

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SITE OF THE LIGHTER WHARF AT BOLINAS

Tucked in a bend of the rugged Marin County coast line, some ten miles north of the Golden Gate, lies the open roadstead of Bolinas Bay, bounded on the west by the treacherous Duxbury Reef and extending south and east in a broad crescent to Rocky Point. Behind the bay and separated from it by a long, glistening sandspit is the shallow Bolinas Lagoon, which stretches northward into a fold in the hills for about two miles.

The only entrance from the sea into the lagoon is through a narrow channel which cuts off the town of Bolinas from the western end of the sandspit. Time was when a schooner drawing ten feet of water could pass over the bar and into the lagoon with ease at any stage of the tide; but, with the introduction of agriculture into the surrounding country, the accumulation of silt in the harbor has gone on at a more rapid rate, until at the present time even smaller vessels must wait for high water before making an entrance.

Few who look on the lagoon today, with its acre upon acre of mud flats exposed at low tide, dream that ships were once launched in its waters or that upon

its surface was once floated a large portion of the wood and lumber supply of San Francisco. Scarcely any evidence of the early maritime activity is now visible, but there remains one relic, in full sight of all who pass, to serve as a reminder of the commerce which old records and local tradition assure us once flourished in that little port. At the head of the lagoon, near the junction of the roads leading to Bolinas, Olema, and Stinson Beach, a few time-scarred, decaying piles raise their battered heads above the water at high tide and tilt crazily over the mud flats during the ebb. They are all that is left of the old wharf from which some thirteen million feet of lumber were loaded onto lighters to be floated out to deeper water near the channel, where the timber was transferred to sea-going vessels and shipped to San Francisco.¹

In the days before the gold rush, magnificent stands of timber clothed the hills in the vicinity of Bolinas. Most important from a commercial point of view was the forest of redwoods which extended from about the middle of the eastern shore of the lagoon northward for a number of miles in the direction of Olema. Remaining

1. B. Brown, Application for registration of historical point of interest. Site of the lighter wharf at Bolinas, Mss., [3].

stumps show that the trees grew to gigantic size in the many gulches which scar the western side of Bolinas Ridge, while the intervening crests were bare or sparsely covered with small and twisted trees.

Besides the redwood, there were other species which were to furnish valuable lumber and abundant firewood. Large stands of Douglas fir covered the slopes north of Bolinas, and the tall, straight trunks and the fine-grained wood of these trees were later much in demand for various construction purposes. Pine, oak and alder also grew in great profusion in the country about the lagoon, and, although unsuitable for being made into lumber, they were soon to be chopped down in great numbers, cut up into cord wood, and shipped off to feed the fires of San Francisco.²

History does not record the date of the first inroads of the axe into that splendid forest. The builders of the lime kilns south of Olema seem to have constructed huts or houses near the scene of their operations, and some timber was employed in the building of the old Briones home on Las Bolinas Rancho in the days before

2. [J. P. Monro-Fraser], History of Marin County, 262-263.

the American conquest. The real destruction of the trees, however, did not begin until the rapid growth of San Francisco during the gold rush days. Then the demand for building materials sent the wood-choppers into all of the accessible local forests, and so high was the cost of lumber and labor that many houses were made as far away as Boston, and even in Chile and China, and shipped to San Francisco in sections.³

Late in 1849, a party arrived at Bolinas Lagoon for the purpose of getting out wharf timbers. So far as is known, they were the first organized body of lumbermen to invade that region. Among them were Joseph Almy, Charles Lauff, B. T. Winslow, James Cummings, James Hough, Fred Sampson, Dr. Grattan, Hiram Nott, William F. Chappell, Henderson, and several others. They were, evidently, impressed by the beauty of the surrounding country, and they were quick to see its economic possibilities, for a number of them remained in Marin County.

Working for hire under a contract held by one of their number, the men cut out the timbers and rafted

3. E. S. Eldredge, The beginnings of San Francisco, II, 595.

them down the lagoon and out through the channel to the roadstead, where they were loaded on schooners. Upon delivery in San Francisco, where it was employed in the construction of wharves and warehouses, the timber brought two dollars a running foot. An attempt was made by Joseph Almy to float one of the log rafts directly to the market, but the experiment came to grief in the rough waters of the "potato patch" off the entrance to the Golden Gate, where the seas pounded the raft to pieces.⁴

To make the best use of the forests, however, it was necessary to install sawmills. These improvements were not long in coming, and, in 1851, Captain Hammond built the first mill in the Bolinas section, on the present site of Woodville. A short time later another mill was erected in a gulch, not far from the first, by the Bolinas Saw Mill Company, which had acquired ownership of Captain Hammond's establishment. Both of the plants were operated by steam and turned out large quantities of lumber. In 1852, the first mill, and probably the second also, was reconstructed by an enterprising mechanic, Captain Oliver Allen, who claimed to have produced

4. [Munro-Fraser], History of Marin County, 267.

the first explosive projectile for the hunting of whales.⁵ Hammond's sawmill was run at intervals for about six years; then the machinery was taken out and shipped to San Francisco. The second mill was sold to George R. Morris, who moved it to Pike County Gulch, on the eastern shore of the lagoon, and operated it there for some time.

Other mills soon followed the first two. J. L. Moulthrop built one in December, 1853, on Peck's Ridge. It was later purchased by Captain Peck and moved farther up the ridge, being known thereafter as the Peck Mill. The last mill to be erected in the Bolinas section was put into operation by D. B. L. Ross and John Rutherford in 1853, and was located on the road from Bolinas to Olema. This mill, built after most of the good timber had been cut, was run but a short time.

When the sawmills were first built in the Bolinas region, it was expected that more than fifty million feet of lumber would be taken out of the nearby forests. The yield, however, was far below that anticipated, and the amount actually realized has been estimated at about fifteen million feet.⁶

5. [Munro-Fraser], History of Marin County, 431-432.

6. Ibid., 263.

The usual methods employed in getting this lumber to market were relatively simple. The trees were felled and the trunks cut up into sections. The logs were then loaded on carts whose wheels were made from solid sections of tree trunks, and were hauled to the mills by ox-teams. When sawed, the lumber was drawn to the head of the lagoon and transferred to lighters which ferried it out over the bar. In the roadstead, the lumber was loaded on vessels for San Francisco. Some of the smaller sea-going boats seem to have entered the lagoon and to have been loaded inside the bar or at the wharves.

About six or eight vessels, ranging in carrying capacity from 8,000 to 120,000 feet of timber, were regularly employed in transporting lumber from Bolinas to the city by the Golden Gate. Most of them were probably schooners, but steam-driven ships were also used. The names of the majority of these vessels are unknown. One steamer, the Governor, or the Eldorado as she was also known, was wrecked at the entrance to the lagoon about 1853, while employed in this trade. Joseph Almy ran the Mill Company's vessel, Julia, for a time in the early 1850's.

An intimate glimpse of one of the schooners which

7. [Munro-Fraser], History of Marin County, 269, 272, 456.

transported the Bolinas lumber to market is given by General William Tecumseh Sherman, in his Memoirs. Early in April, 1853, Sherman, then a captain, was approaching San Francisco on board the steamship Lewis. As was customary at the end of the long voyage from Central America, the cabin passengers had bought quantities of champagne and cigars, and, on the day before the port was to be reached, had held a grand celebration in honor of the ship's officers. The ovation proved to be premature, however, for the vessel lost her bearings in a dense fog and before dawn the next morning was hard aground near Duxbury Reef.

Fortunately, the sea was calm and the passengers were all safely landed on the beach near Bolinas. No one in the shipwrecked party knew exactly where they were or how far away help would be found. To help clear up the situation, Captain Sherman and a fellow passenger, a young man of about eighteen, scrambled up the bluff behind the beach and set off to explore the surrounding country. They soon discovered trails, bands of horses, and other signs of civilization, and after a walk of about three miles they came upon a board shanty in which four men were eating.

Inquiries soon revealed that the men were employed at a nearby sawmill and that Sherman and his companion had reached "Baulinas Creek," by which name Bolinas Lagoon seems to have been known locally. When the plight

of the shipwrecked passengers was made known, the lumbermen said that they were engaged in shipping lumber to San Francisco and that a schooner with a full load was at that moment waiting in the lagoon for high water in order to pass over the bar.

Leaving a note to be delivered to the captain of the Lewis, Sherman and his fellow passenger walked down to the shore of the lagoon and pushed on in the direction of the channel. They soon descried the schooner out in the stream and hailed it. A small boat put out from the vessel, and the two travelers were taken on board. For a small sum the "Captain" willingly agreed to carry them to San Francisco, where help could be secured for the stranded passengers at Bolinas. As the entire crew of the schooner consisted of one small boy about twelve years old, Sherman and his companion were pressed into service to help raise the anchor and pole the vessel down the lagoon and out over the bar at high tide. Once in open water, the sails were hoisted, and the little craft moved rapidly along before a strong northwest wind.

Upon reaching the entrance to the Golden Gate, however, the same stretch of rough water which had broken up Captain Almy's raft a few years before also brought grief to the little schooner. Too much of her load of lumber had been piled on deck, where it was lashed to ring-

bolts with rawhide thongs, and when the heavy seas of the "potato patch" struck the vessel, its equilibrium was upset and it turned over, throwing Sherman into the water. The occupants of the boat soon saw that there was no danger of its going down, and clambered up on the side to wait until help arrived. Before long, a small boat approached the wreck and Sherman was taken off. Landing at the Presidio, he made his way to the city, arriving at the steamship office with the news of the disaster at just the same time as the ship's purser, who had gone by a different route.⁸ Meanwhile, back at Bolinas Lagoon, the women passengers had been escorted to Plumb's sawmill, where they were fed and comfortably quartered until the rescue boats from San Francisco arrived at the scene of the wreck.⁹

By the end of the 50's the sawmills had devoured most of the trees suitable for being made into lumber, and their activities slacked off rapidly in the Bolinas region. The cutting of firewood for the San Francisco market, however, continued to be an important industry for a number of years. As late as 1875 it could be said that "thousands

8. Sherman, W. T., Memoirs, I, 95-100.

9. Alta California, April 10, 11, 1853.

of cords are annually brought from the spurs and ridges of Tamalpais... and shipped away."¹⁰ It is said that at the height of the trade four hundred cords of wood a week were sent out from the lagoon. Much of the carrying was done on a fleet of small vessels owned by Captain J. A. Morgan and known locally as the "Mosquito Fleet." During rush seasons as many as ten schooners, each making two trips a week, were employed in that business. It has been estimated that more than five hundred thousand cords of wood were shipped from the region of Bolinas.¹¹

But the forests could not keep on giving generously forever. By 1880, authors were writing of the cord wood industry in the past tense. At that time, where formerly were lofty forests of redwood, "not even the stroke of an ax" was heard. Today, only the piles of the old lighter wharf mark the site of once busy operations and serve as a reminder of the lumbering business which gave employment to hundreds of men in the region of Bolinas Lagoon.¹²

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10. G. W. Gift, Something about California, 16.
 11. [Munro-Fraser], History of Marin County, 272.
 12. Ibid., 269-270.

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