Arcata Marsh History: Union Wharf, Mad River Canal, Reclamation, Lumber Mills, City Designs

Susie Van Kirk

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/svk

Part of the Architecture Commons, Indigenous Studies Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/svk/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Susie Van Kirk Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.
Arcata Marsh History
Union Wharf, Mad River Canal, Reclamation, Lumber Mills, City Designs

Prepared for:
Gary Friedrichsen
Audubon Society
Docent Training

Prepared by:
Susie Van Kirk
Historic Resources Consultant
P.O. Box 568
Bayside, CA 95524
707-822-6066
sfvkirk@gmail.com

February 2015
# Table of Contents

Wiyot Residents: 1  
White Settlement: 1  
Union Wharf: 5  
Mad River Canal: 17  
Wharf Abandoned: 21  
Reclamation: 22  
Lumber Mills: 24  
City Designs: 29  
Bibliography: 35

Maps and Photographs  
U.S. Coast Survey. 1870. Marsh land and sloughs: 3  
Shuster photo. 12 July 1947. Aerial of Arcata and bay: 6  
Unknown photographer. 1890s. Arcata wharf: 10  
Cherry photo. 1883. Wharf and Mr. Sharp: 12  
Ericson photo. c. 1892. Wharf: 14  
Strong photo. 1884. Wharf with cargoes: 16  
U.S. Coast Survey. 1870. Mad River Canal: 18  
Grant Photo. 1877. Mad River Canal: 20  
Ericson Photo. no date. Wharf: 21  
Ericson Photo. c. 1892. Diking machine: 23  
Shuster photo. 27 Dec. 1950. Aerial of Durable and Humboldt Handlers: 28  
Arcata Union. 13 Dec. 1968. Arcata’s proposed marina: 32
**Wiyot Residents.** From time immemorial, Wiyot people lived in permanent villages around North or Arcata Bay. Tidal flats and sloughs, bay channels, brackish marshes, creeks, and seasonal wetlands and ponds were the nature of things, all providers of food and materials. The people fished, harvested bivalves and crustaceans, gathered plant materials, and hunted waterfowl, marine mammals, and upland game. The bay and its environs sustained them.

Humboldt Bay almost defied description when Euro-Americans came to claim it. From aboard his schooner *Laura Virginia*, anchored in the bay, Capt. Douglas Ottinger wrote his wife:

Trinity Bay, Upper California [not yet named “Humboldt”]
April 20, 1850

...I must now tell you that the land is so beautiful and the soil so rich that I was almost fascinated with the scene, and if I could have you and Ginney, Rachel and our family, with some of our valued friends, I could almost give up Erie. In addition to the good qualities of the land, the waters produce clams in abundance as well as fish; and geese, ducks, snipe, plover, etc. are about as numerous as wild pigeons at Erie in the spring. The wood is not less productive than the waters and droves of elk and deer, with a goodly number of bears are always to be found....(Lewis 1966)

Tidal sloughs were the transportation corridors for Wiyot people as they moved between their homes and their hunting and gathering places, trading connections, and friends and family. No tide tables needed, these skilled boatmen knew when to maneuver their redwood canoes through the sloughs moving with the incoming tides to the Wiyot towns on Mad River, the plateau north of town, and Arcata Prairie, and at Bayside and Walker Point, where a canoe on Fay Slough could draw right up to the front door.

Indigenous people managed their environment in whatever ways were available to them, but unlike the johnny-come-lately folks that arrived in the spring of 1850, Wiyot people adapted to this world, living within the constraints it imposed and enjoying its bounty. In contrast, white settlers saw this environment as one to be exploited and manipulated. Wiyot people recognized mudflats and marshes as sources of food; the settlers viewed them as impediments. Native villages in white settlement areas were soon abandoned, sending their displaced residents elsewhere and, in many cases, to their deaths.

**White Settlement.** In search of a supply and trading center, Trinity River miners first located Humboldt Bay by land at Christmas 1849. Although previous expeditions by sea had identified the bay, (even the Russians made a chart of it), no
settlements were established until the spring of 1850 after the miners made it to Sonoma and reported on their discovery (Lewis 1966). Accounts of the newly-located bay were reported in the San Francisco paper. Described as one of the most “picturesque and delightful places in California,” visitors to this far-flung land depicted the region’s charms, resources and business advantages in “glowing colors” and quite correctly recognized that the three emerging settlements, Humboldt City at Buhne’s Point, Eureka, and Union, were vying to “monopolize the trade” (Daily Alta California 5 Aug. 1850).

A settlement company organized in San Francisco and called the Union Company arrived in April 1850, but finding the Eureka site already claimed, members of the company moved around the bay to Arcata Prairie, first visited by the miners several months before. Dismissing native residents, the land was considered free for the taking. Once claims were staked out, trading began. This time, however, ownership required monetary exchanges, land was no longer free for the taking.

Union Town or Union, as Arcata was known for its first decade, and Trinidad served as the supply centers for the mines up the coast and into the interior regions on the Klamath at Weitchpec and upriver at Orleans, and most notably on the Salmon river, both north and south forks and the main stem. Rugged, rugged territory between Union and those distant mining regions depended on the strong and steady mule. Large pack trains loaded up at Union for the arduous journey to bring grub and tools to the mining camps along the rivers.

Freight was delivered to Eureka docks by vessels out of San Francisco, but to get those supplies to Union, low-draft lighters and barges were employed for the short trip to the Big Slough or Embarcadero Slough (Gannon Slough). Today it is difficult to envision little Gannon Slough as a navigable waterway, its volume severely diminished and even its location changed by the freeway. But at one time, it received water from numerous creeks and rivulets off the hillside and, when it reached the flats, from other sloughs. The daily tides ebbed and flowed through these sloughs.

A number of sloughs came to the southern edge of town, and the east boundary was on the margin of a large salt water slough called Big Slough. It was difficult for the large ships to dock here, and only small boats could get up the slough. Almost every business firm in Union had a warehouse on Big Slough. These buildings were built from the main landing on Front street to the upper landing near Fifth and A streets. (Carranco and Sorensen 1988)
U.S. Coast Survey. 1870. HSU Library, Humboldt Room
Front street puts the lower landing on the bay; the upper landing, somewhere near the present soccer fields and community center. In the 1850s, when today’s little slough was a big slough, it was the shipping point for Union, serving a burgeoning freighting business and passenger travel.

Omnibus Line—We notice from an advertisement that Messrs. Tilley & Co. have commenced running an omnibus from the steamboat landing in Union. It has been needed for some time past and we hope that they may meet with sufficient encouragement to induce them to repair the road to the mouth of the slough. (Humboldt Times 4 Nov. 1854)

Tilley & Company’s ad was for Murdock’s Stables in Union, opened as a boarding, livery and stock stables, providing shelter and “good fare” for “trains of mules,” and announcing that the “OMNIBUS will make regular trips to and from the steamer Glide” (Humboldt Times 4 Nov. 1854).

The timber industry may not have been the reason for Humboldt Bay’s settlement, but it soon eclipsed gold as the region’s primary industry. Union’s first mill was located on Campbell Creek (upper Gannon Slough) on the block now bounded by 10th, 11th, B and C streets in East Arcata. Robert Titlow wrote about these early days, using his grandfather as the narrator.

“Those first years in Union were busy ones, as we built homes, stores, blacksmith shops, etc. We had to hew from redwood logs all timbers for construction, split shakes and haul or raft lumber from Eureka. All of this gave me the idea that a sawmill business in Union might be a wise venture. Early in 1853, I interested Dunbar Averill…and John McLain in joining me….

“We acquired ten blocks in East Union lying south of 13th street and east of E street, bounded on south by 10th street and a considerable amount of land lying east of the town limits. This land had a fine stand of redwood and spruce timber that would serve our purpose well. The terrain was almost flat with a little slope toward the mill which made for good oxen hauling.

“The mill was operated by steam. During the first years we sold most of our lumber locally and later shipped it to San Francisco. We received up to $12.00 per thousand dockside….” (Arcata Union 19 Sept. 1969)

In the 1870s, James Gannon began logging the upper reaches of Campbell Creek, now Arcata’s Community Forest. Traveling correspondent, “Mikros,” gave Humboldt Bay readers some insight into Gannon’s operation in 1874.

In the second letter concerning the lumber interests around Arcata, we desire to speak of the logging claim nearest the village. It is the possession of Mr. James Gannon. The road leading from Arcata to Eureka [7th street/Bayside Road/Old Arcata Road] crosses a railroad about a half mile from the former place. This railroad leads up to the
timber where the logs are cut. The length of this railroad from the landing, where the logs are placed on the trucks, to the Embarcadero slough, which leads into the bay, is a mile and a quarter. The grade of the road is graduate descent (one place rather abrupt) and the four horses attached to the truck easily haul the heaviest logs. From the terminus of the railroad to the timber where the logs are cut, there is a splendid snaking ground, about half a mile long….The distance from the slough is so great that they do not on an average put more than 13,000 feet of logs onto it….Though Mr. Gannon has in the five years he has been logging on it, secured 9,000,000 feet of logs. There is sufficient timber remaining to keep him busy two years after the present season. “Mikros” (Weekly Humboldt Times 27 June 1874).

**Union Wharf.** The slough did yeoman service, but some Union men saw the limitations of slough freighting and proposed a facility to serve an ocean trade. The town was growing, its merchants busily filing orders for the mines in response to a demand that exceeded any previous time (Humboldt Times 16 Sept. 1854). And another industry was showing its muscle. Within four years of settlement, twenty miles of logging “railroads” were operating around Humboldt Bay where two hundred men were engaged in the woods (Humboldt Times 9 Sept. 1854). It was clear that a shipping facility for goods coming in and lumber going out would stimulate both trades, benefit the town’s economy and reward its developers.

On November 21, 1854, mill owners Thomas Titlow and Dunbar Averill entered into an agreement with Stillman Daby, Byron Deming and Henry W. Walker, whereby Daby and partners would, within ten months, construct a wharf “from the town of Union to ship channel on Humboldt Bay.” Titlow and Averill would advance them $1,500 and provide the construction lumber, consisting of three-inch planks 16 feet long and four-by-four inch scantling. The amount of lumber needed was estimated at 250,000 feet (Recorder’s Office, Miscellany A: 29; amended A:31).

The wharf company received a Certificate of Incorporation on December 15, 1854. The Union Plank Walk Rail Track and Wharf Company declared its intention to build a walk, track and wharf from the “southwest corner of the public square in the town of Union…and running in a southwesterly direction and in a straight line across the marsh and the flats in Humboldt Bay to the ship channel…for the purpose of transporting freight and passengers over the same and for such other purposes.” Incorporated for twenty years, the company had a capital stock of $15,000 divided into 60 shares and there were five directors, including Daby, president and Deming, secretary with Walker, Walter Van Dyke and J.E. Wyman as the remaining directors (Misc. A:23). Before the end of December 1854, the wharf company leased a 30x50-foot lot at the northeast corner of Block
153 (present site of the Arcata Post Office) from M.M. Steinthal for the construction of a warehouse, along with a right-of-way over the south half of the block (Misc. A:25).

The east and south halves of this block (bounded by 7th, 8th, H and I streets) served as the warehouse and depot location, first for the wharf company, later for the Arcata and Mad River Railroad, and still later as the regional bus depot. Running the track in a “straight line” from the Plaza to the wharf was no exaggeration; the wharf company was definitely committed to the “shortest-distance-between-two-points” principle. From the back of the warehouse block, the track proceeded directly to a ship channel at a 45 degree angle. Crossing the block between 6th and 5th and H and I streets, the line created a pie-shaped parcel that remains today (the Marsh House). An 1887 deed describes the property as bounded on the east by the “roadbed of the Arcata and Mad River Railroad” (Recorder’s Office, Deeds 23:448). Never veering an iota, the line headed directly across the marsh and mud flats to its deep-water destination. A 1947 aerial photograph provides one of the best views of that “straight-as-an-arrow” railroad.
Work on the “monster” wharf, 11,000 feet in length and extended sufficiently to accommodate ships drawing only ten to eleven feet, began in January 1855 and before the end of the month, the contractors had finished 3,100 feet, laid the rails, and were running cars over that distance (Humboldt Times 18 Nov. 1854, 20 Jan. 1855). After four months of construction, the wharf was ready for freight and passengers.

Union Wharf—This stupendous undertaking, eleven thousand feet long, will be finished in about thirty days and we hope that one of the first acts of the new Board of Supervisors will be to regulate the tariff of charges over the wharf at a fair and just rate. The company have made a large and adventurous investment upon which they will scarcely realize for some time, the interest of their money. They should be allowed fifty cents for each passenger over the road, whether in cars or on foot. That tariff of charges will not affect the traveling community, as the rates of passage across the bay will be reduced in accordance, and by the completion of the wharf, boats can always, at any tide, land their passengers, thereby saving the necessity of persons wading through the mud, as they have heretofore been compelled to do, or wait for high tides. Those who are not satisfied to pay for the privilege of passing over the road, can continue to patronize the slough. (Humboldt Times 14 April 1855)

Not quite ready to give up on slough transportation, the steamers Glide and Know Nothing gave shippers and passengers a choice—the wharf or the embarcadero of the slough, shippers $1.50 per ton and passengers each way, one dollar (Humboldt Times 28 April 1855). So, if you preferred wet feet and dirty shoes and hanging out for high tides, Big Slough was your ticket, otherwise the new wharf was awaiting your business.

Having received construction financing from local subscribers along with half the stock, the company felt obligated to reveal potential expenses and revenue (Humboldt Times 18 Nov. 1854). Wages for three men, feed for two horses, repair and replacement of planks and rails, wear and tear on machinery and interest on $15,000 at 2% per month added up to $8,380 per year; freight, packages and passengers, plus wharf fees on vessels came in at $7,500 (Humboldt Times 5 May 1855).

The local history narrative often claims this enterprise as California’s first railroad, but its promoters called it a “rail track,” and it lacked two common descriptors of a railroad—iron tracks and an iron locomotive. Instead the tracks were wood and the locomotive was a horse. Those first rails were six-by-six timbers with a running surface of two-by-fours made of pepperwood (Carranco and Sorensen 1988). One defender of the railroad designation for these tracks wrote:
These early logging railways were very primitive in form and construction, yet they were railroads....Usually the rails were made of two parallel straight saplings, while the trucks were fitted with big axles and large flanged wheels hewed out hollow to fit the track. Horses or mules furnished the motive power....What comes nearer the present day conception of a railroad was constructed by the Union Wharf and Plank Walk Co. during the spring of 1855. It extended from the town of Union a distance of one mile to the end of the wharf, an old white horse named “Spanking Fury,” serving for many years as locomotive. (Coy 1929)

Recalling that the wharf company’s budget included feed for two horses, Spanking Fury may have shared the task of pulling the four-wheel car that comprised the first rolling stock. Perhaps the other horse was Old Gray, who found himself derailed in the “first locomotive accident.”

A Locomotive Off the Track—Saturday last, as the car was on its way down, loaded with passengers, express, etc. for the Goliath, lying at the wharf at the lower end of the road, one of the reins of the horse attached to the car caught in the wheel and the locomotive was thrown off the track. It so happened that the car, at the time, was crossing the gulch just below town [Jolly Giant Creek] over which the road passes, at an elevation in the center of about fifteen feet—and “Old Gray” was suspended midway between the track and the water and mud beneath, until he was dropped by cutting the traces. One of the passengers, who said he had never seen a railroad before, was seized with panic and jumped off in the opposite direction and brought up in the brush and mud in the middle of the gulch. The moment he struck he sang out lustily for fear the car and all the passengers were coming down on top of him. The horse was led out of the mire on one side, and “greeny” was helped out of the brush and mud on the other. No bones, either horse or human, were broken, and the car was on its way again. Thus ended the first locomotive accident. (Humboldt Times 1 May 1856)

Arcata residents desiring a trip to Eureka generally found the bay’s ferry preferable to a horseback ride around its edges. Not only was it much quicker, it was also possible, when the trail, now Old Arcata Road, was impossible. Following the Indian footpath, long established to skirt the bay’s marshes and tides, horseback riders encountered rough going, including such conditions as—“the county road is fenced in…and parties living near the first slough this side of Eureka have carried off a large portion of the planks from the bridge, rendering the road impassable” (Humboldt Times 2 June 1855).

Passenger service from the Plaza to Eureka, via the railroad and ferry, was an important part of the wharf company’s business. It took decades after settlement before the road connection between the two towns was anything adequate for either horses or wheeled vehicles. And if travel was to San Francisco, it was by water, even after the turn-of-the-century, as the north coast waited completion of
the railroad to the metropolis in 1914. Humboldt Bay residents were using the wharf soon after its completion, as reported when Eureka people—gentlemen, ladies, and small children—had difficulty returning from Union’s Fourth of July celebration and the ladies had to carry their children and walk to the end of the wharf after the conductor “refused to carry them on the cars to the steamer” (no fathers carrying their small children!) (Humboldt Times 7 July 1855). When a mare, attached to a rail car, ran away, breaking a hind leg, the male passengers jumped out of the car into the mud, but the ladies on board remained seated, exhibiting “much more coolness than the lords of creation” (Humboldt Times 6 Oct. 1855). Maybe this event was actually the “first locomotive accident.” Fare for foot passengers was 25 cents, car passengers, 50 cents (Northern Californian 4 Jan. 1860). The well-known bay steamer, little Gussie McAlpine, carried passengers twice a day between Arcata and Eureka (Weekly Humboldt Times 7 June 1873). In 1875, the wharf company secured a covered car, which allowed passengers to travel over the railroad “without being exposed to the rain” (Humboldt Times 4 Dec. 1875).

Although the arrangement with the Titlow Mill prompted Daby and associates to build the wharf, it was the facility’s business with Union merchants and their trade with the miners that supported the enterprise in its early days. The lumber industry, still in its infancy, would not become the dominant player for nearly two decades with the construction of mills north of town. In the meantime, Union merchants were cashing in as the demand from the interior continued to grow. The Humboldt Times, a weekly published in Union at the time, reported on the town’s business atmosphere.

Trade—This week has presented an unusual business appearance and bustle. The goods received here during the week have been sold out without supplying the demand. Sales have been so brisk that on yesterday our merchants had scarcely sufficient stock to make it an object to advertise. On Thursday and yesterday upwards of 500 mules, heavily laden, left for Klamath and Salmon rivers, alone. Full cargoes are daily expected by the steamer Goliah, schooner Ryerson and other sail vessel.

The immense immigration of miners to our mines, together with the new discoveries of valuable places, assures everyone that business will be increased in more than a quadruple ratio over that of any former year. (Humboldt Times 14 April 1855).

The wharf company made several significant improvements in 1870: a warehouse, 60x80 feet, was constructed adjacent to its depot at the southwest corner of H and 8th street and another one, 30x100 feet, at the terminus of the wharf. Other improvements were repair of the wharf and rail track, but the really big news was the acquisition of an engine, the newspaper reporting that a
“locomotive is to be placed on the road to take the place of the horse power heretofore employed” (Humboldt Times 2 July 1870). Perhaps it was at this time that the wooden rails were covered with strap iron to better accommodate the new locomotive and to prepare for big developments in the lumber trade.

It should be noted here that there is some contradiction regarding the first “iron horse” on the wharf railroad. Carranco and Sorensen (1988) state that in 1875, “the road put into service its first steam locomotive called the Black Diamond” and Borden (1954) also reported that the “first steam locomotive, named the Black Diamond,” was put into service that same year. Perhaps the locomotive mentioned in 1870, being limited to travel between the Plaza and the wharf, barely qualified for the name, but, at least, it was a cut above a toiling horse. By 1875 events north of Arcata—construction of two mills—required the more powerful locomotive to move lumber to the wharf.
In the spring of 1872, Isaac Minor and Noah Falk built the Dolly Varden mill near old Cape Curtis north of town (Weekly Humboldt Times 4 May 1872). By summer the new sawmill was running “full blast,” cutting about 20,000 feet a day (Weekly Humboldt Times, 13 July 1872). A year later the Dolly Varden used the wharf to ship 150,000 feet of lumber to San Francisco (Weekly Humboldt Times 28 June 1873). The Falk and Minor partnership was so successful in its first milling endeavor that another mill, the Jolly Giant, was constructed in 1875 in the creek canyon where present-day HSU dorms are located (Weekly Humboldt Times 13 Feb, 27 Feb, 10 April 1875).

In 1873, G.W.B. Yocum leased controlling interest in the wharf company, which he managed under the name of the Union Plank Walk and Rail Track Company for two years (Weekly Humboldt Times 7 June 1873). Incorporation of the Arcata Transportation Company in 1875 brought together a new group of directors, H. Mentz, N. Haun, G.W.B. Yocum, C.B. Stone, and S.M. Buck, with Yocum and Haun actively involved in management of the wharf and track (Weekly Humboldt Times 12 June 1875, 22 and 29 Jan. 1876). Falk and Minor arranged with Yocum to extend the wharf to “deep water,” another 600 feet, and to extend the rail track from the Plaza depot to the new Jolly Giant mill (Weekly Humboldt Times 27 Feb. 1875). After the rails were completed to Jolly Giant, the company pressed forward, “bravely” to the Dolly Varden, which it reached in late April 1876 (Daily Standard 7 April, 28 April 1876). Keeping its passengers in mind, the transportation company put a new steamer on line in 1878. Christened Alta, the 90-foot long vessel was launched at the Fairhaven shipyards to serve the passenger trade between Arcata and Eureka, the little Gussie “not being adequate to supply the wants of the increasing traveling public” (Democratic Standard 23 March, 13 July 1878).

Just a month or so before the incorporation of the Arcata Transportation Company, the old wharf company contracted with Mr. Persons of the Eureka Foundry for an engine whose construction would be completed in two or three weeks (Weekly Humboldt Times 22 May 1875). But those weeks turned into months as problems plagued the much-longed-for locomotive. In September, as extension of the wharf was approaching completion, it was reported that the locomotive would be ready for work in about two weeks (Weekly Humboldt Times 11 Sept. 1875). Early October found the Jolly Giant and Dolly Varden sawing lumber so fast that “horse power” wasn’t enough, so their owners were anxiously awaiting the new locomotive, now scheduled for action in another two or three weeks (Weekly Humboldt Times 2 Oct. 1875). Gear wheels that didn’t break seemed elusive; at least two sets were brought up from San Francisco before the
locomotive was finally put on the tracks (Weekly Humboldt Times 22 Jan., 29 Jan 1876). On its first run to Jolly Giant mill to pick up three cars of lumber, a coupling broke, but once repaired, the locomotive “sailed away under 120 pounds of steam” to the “terminus of the track” on Arcata wharf (Weekly Humboldt Times 29 Jan. 1876). When her initial problems were resolved and she settled into the routine, the little engine pulled six cars back and forth between the mills and the wharf (Democratic Standard 23 March 1878). During her first four years, the locomotive was referred to as E. Sharp.

The “E. Sharp.” The locomotive, formerly known by the above high sounding name and used in drawing lumber cars to and from the end of Arcata Wharf, has been undergoing many needed repairs of late, and has again been placed upon the track to resume her accustomed occupation. Mr. E. Sharp, who acts in the quadruple capacity of chief engineer, conductor, ticket agent and brakeman, informs us that he is tired of the name of E. Sharp and that he selected the more appropriate one of Black Diamond for his reconstructed engine. The locomotive is now better than ever before and will answer every purpose for which she is intended. (Arcata Leader 22 May 1880)

Edgar Cherry Photo. 1883. Ferry Alta and Mr. E. Sharp. Palmquist collection. HSU Library. 2003.01.1566

In a reminiscence Byron Smith talked about the Black Diamond, recalling that the engine was so small that the Engineer E. Sharp had to stoop to get in and out. Standing six feet six inches, Mr. Sharp presented a “funny sight” as he squeezed himself in and out of the locomotive (Arcata Union 5 July 1963).
That Mr. Sharp was a tall guy is verified by an 1883 Edgar Cherry photograph. In a group of men on the wharf, two are identified, one as “Sharp,” standing head and shoulders above the other men, hat on top.

In 1881, the railroad was extended once again to a new mill being constructed at Warren Creek (Weekly Humboldt Times 28 May, 20 Aug. 1881). During this busy time of mill and railroad construction, the Arcata and Mad River Railroad (Yocum still very much involved) was incorporated, absorbing the Arcata Transportation Co., for the purpose of completing a 15-mile railroad from the wharf to the North Fork Mad River. Directors were G.W.B. Yocum, 372 shares and R.M. Fernald, 372 shares, with the remaining stockholders with two shares each, B. Deming, Austin Wiley and E.A. Deming (Weekly Humboldt Times 23 July 1881). Wooden rails and faithful “Spanking Furies” were things of the past, as iron rails and locomotives opened up Mad River’s redwood forests. Hard on the heels of the Warren Creek Mill were Minor’s mill at Glendale across Mad River, then the Chandler Mill at Blue Lake, and finally, the Korbel Brothers’ Mill at North Fork, all happening between 1881 and 1883 (Democratic Standard 21 May 1881, 13 Jan. 1883, 5 May 1883, 3 Nov. 1883).

The Arcata Transportation Co. has made great improvements in their works, and what was but a short time ago known as a one-horse railroad concern will in a few days assume the dignity of a first-class steam railway and transact business that will prove remunerative to the builders and open up a trade that will at once assume large proportions and steadily increase as time rolls on. The original road was built in ’52 [’55] from Arcata to deep water in the bay, a distance of two miles, and was operated by truck cars drawn by horses. About six years ago, mills were built in the woods near Arcata, the road was extended out half a mile to the ship channel, so that sea-going vessels might lay at the wharf and take in cargoes of lumber. As the large body of redwood on this side of Mad River was about to be opened up, the Transportation Co. at once saw the necessity of making improvements on a larger scale than ever before in order to be able to meet the requirements of the trade. The road bed has been extended to Warren Creek, a tributary of Mad river opposite John Vance’s lumber works [at Essex] and has now a length of about seven miles. No grading needed from Dolly Varden to the Webster place, but trestlework [trestlework, indeed!] was needed from there to the Warren Creek mill. Old pine and laurel rails have given way to the improved Iron T rails, laid from the edge of the marsh to the mill. (Weekly Humboldt Times 22 April 1882).
Arcata--…..The engine and train of the Arcata and Mad River Railroad keeps busy at work transporting lumber from the Warren Creek mill and Falk’s Giant mills to the wharf, where there is generally two to four vessels loading. Just think of the difference between now and when the old Gussie McAlpine was the sole occupant of the wharf. Everything denotes thrift and “go-ahead.” In the march of improvement, the Gussie gave way to the Alta, the old wooden railroad on the wharf with old “Bones” and the old car with a [illegible] attached has given place to an iron railroad, a palace car for passengers and the Arcata, a trim little engine for a horse, and all within the last five years….A few days ago we learned from Mr. Geo. W. Chandler, Esq., that they were pushing their mill at Blue Lake to a rapid completion and with good luck would have it running in six weeks. This will call for an extension of the railroad up Mad river.

One thing is sure, that if the Arcata and Mad River Railroad does not take steps, and that soon, to extend their road from this side, other parties will build the road on the other side of the river and thus divert all the freight and lumber to other points than Arcata…. (Democratic Standard (13 Jan. 1883).

The Arcata and Mad River Railroad rose to the occasion and took those “steps.” But it wasn’t local interests, but the Korbel Brothers, who purchased the A&M RR in March 1883 and built the Mad River bridge at Skedaddle and finished the road to their North Fork mill (Democratic Standard 31 March, 6 April 1883). It is generally acknowledged that Chinese workers played a key role in the construction of American railroads, but few know that they worked on the 1881 road between Dolly Varden and Warren Creek and the extension across the river and to the North Fork (Weekly Humboldt Times 20 Aug. 1881; Daily Times
Telephone 12 July 1883). August 29th, 1883 marked a memorable day when the Korbels’ locomotive North Fork “steamed into Chandler’s lumber yard in Blue Lake” (Democratic Standard 1 Sept. 1883). Two months later the Korbel mill was cutting its first lumber and initiating a pretty amazing run that lasted 131 years! (Democratic Standard 3 Nov. 1883).

Mad River business made for a booming railroad and wharf. Additional lumber cars were put on the rails and one report in the summer of 1885 noted that nine schooners were at wharf loading lumber cargoes (Humboldt Standard 1 May 1884, 26 Aug. 1885). In reviewing shipping activities for 1885, the Arcata and Mad River Railroad reported that 142 vessels called at the wharf to load a variety of cargoes, including 22 million feet of lumber; 38 million shingles; 1,250,000 shakes; 22,000 posts; 503 cords of tan bark; 31,392 packages; 263,298 pounds of wool; and a million-and-a-half pounds of potatoes. And, without a single accident or casualty, the railroad and wharf served 32,000 passengers (Humboldt Standard 7 Jan. 1886). By the summer of 1886, Mad River woods and mills were humming, 700 men at work between Arcata and North Fork (Arcata Union 14 Aug. 1886).

Lest anyone think the wharf was simply a long stretch of wooden planks with tracks, void of all else, think again. Photographs taken during its heyday and newspaper references suggest something far different. One of the first buildings was a depot, perhaps part office and part waiting area (Democratic Standard 21 May 1881). The warehouse constructed in 1870 was a substantial structure covering 3,000 square feet and with a 30-foot width, suggests that the wharf’s own width was something well over 30 feet (Humboldt Times 2 July 1870). Two years later, a high tide and heavy sea swept away a large portion of the wharf between the edge of the marsh and the “outer” warehouse, implying that there was more than one on the wharf (Weekly Humboldt Times 13 Jan. 1872). A Nathan Strong photograph, taken about 1884, shows a busy wharf with a vessel alongside. Buildings include a large, white-painted warehouse topped by louvered, ventilation cupolas, and to the side, gabled-roof, single-story houses for the men who lived and worked on the wharf. The image shows stacks of shingles on the wharf and rail cars loaded with wagon wheels, barrels, and sacks and bags of something, possibly potatoes and wool. When a fire in 1908 destroyed the cookhouse, 200 feet of wharf, and a large warehouse, the men on the wharf were boarded in Arcata while a new and larger building was under construction (Arcata Union 16 May 1908).
The 1855 plank walk, rail track and wharf facility was constructed from the Plaza, across marsh and tidal flats to the ship channel for a total of 11,000 feet or just over two miles. In subsequent years, several extensions were made to access deeper water. When Falk and Minor asked the wharf company to extend its railroad to their new Jolly Giant mill in 1875, they also asked that the wharf be extended to “deep water,” a distance of 600 feet (Weekly Humboldt Times 27 Feb. 1875). After the Korbel Brothers took over the Arcata and Mad River Railroad, they decided to extend the wharf 600 feet to “greatly enhance the shipping facilities of that point” (Daily Times Telephone 3 May 1883). The following year, due to increased business, another 100 feet were to be added and two years later, the Harbor Commissioners granted the railroad permission to extend the wharf 500 feet along the channel (Humboldt Standard 1 May 1884, 21 April 1886). If all these extensions were actually separate, completed undertakings, the wharf eventually extended a total of 12,800 feet in search of deeper water.

When the editor of the Leader reported on the loss of the wharf’s old depot in 1881, he also made a pointed observation.
The old depot of the Arcata Transportation company yielded to the pressure of the gale on Tuesday and toppled into the bay. This building was erected in the fall of 1855, and used by the company until the wharf was extended a few years ago. A view of the situation where the old depot stood admonishes us how rapidly the channels in the bay are filling up. Large steamers once came to that wharf. We have seen the Santa Cruz, steamer Columbia and steamer Goliah discharging freight in the old depot. Now the channel is so filled up as to be useless for all boating purposes. (Democratic Standard 21 May 1881)

This commentary would suggest some long ago day, but the Leader was writing just 25 years after the wharf’s construction. Repeated extensions to reach “deep water” suggest a couple of issues—larger ships required deeper water than the 1855 ship channel of 10 or 11 feet, and, as noted above, the bay was filling with sediment. Land uses and development were obvious culprits, but one major influence was the Mad River Canal.

**Mad River Canal.** While Messrs. Daby and partners were developing a wharf for the fledgling community, Messrs. Daily, Butler, Handy and others were digging a canal to divert Mad River waters into Mad River Slough, and ultimately into Humboldt Bay for the purpose of delivering logs to Eureka mills (Humboldt Times 2 Dec. 1854). Located about a mile-and-a-half up Mad River from tide water, the canal was about three-quarters of a mile long—river to slough (West Coast Signal 16 April 1873). Somewhat distant from the wharf, the canal would, nonetheless, affect the latter’s future.

Canal developers anticipated that the manmade water course would take almost the entire Mad River, and as there was considerable fall all along the canal from river to bay, the new waterway would become a “permanent bed” (Humboldt Times 2 Dec. 1854). River driving as practiced in the logging woods of Maine and the maritime provinces of Canada found limited utility in northern California. Probably the most long-term and extensively-used stream for river driving was Elk River, a bay tributary south of Eureka, but efforts to drive on Mad River were also attempted in hopes of opening vast redwood forests to intensive logging.

The plan to drive logs on Mad River was simple in concept, but difficult to implement. The idea was to log along the river during the summer months, line the logs up on the river beaches and wait for winter freshets to float them into the river. Propelled downstream on the flooding river, the logs would turn into the canal, pass through Mad River Slough and out into the bay, where they would be rafted to Eureka’s waterfront mills.
Turning old-growth redwood logs of tremendous weight and size into a small canal was a challenge, to put it mildly. Booms across the river near the canal were no match for the massive flotillas of redwood logs barreling down the drive. Over the years, Mad River loggers lost thousands of feet of logs, “swept out to sea,” when the booms broke (Humboldt Times 16 Nov. 1872). In 1873, Messrs. Jackman and McCann put about a million feet of logs into river, but lost 150,000 feet to the ocean (Humboldt Times 4 July 1874). Long story short, numerous booms tried and failed to corral the headstrong logs, even the mother of all booms, authorized by the California Legislature in 1876 (Humboldt Times 5 March 1876). By this time, some twenty years since the canal was first utilized, people were voicing opposition not only to another boom, but the operation of the canal. “One Interested” pointed out the obvious.

….for only those who know that river, who know the nature of the country through which it flows, know the volume of water and the amount of mud and driftwood which it carries in time of freshets, can judge of the damage which it can do Humboldt Bay and its navigation. (Humboldt Times 8 March 1876)
With the incorporation of the Mad River Boom and Land Company, the newspaper editor opined that the new company was determined to construct a boom that would “withstand all freshets,” holding the key to the vast timber resources of the Mad River region and working “wonders in this country that is now almost wholly useless” (Weekly Humboldt Times (9 June 1877).

Construction of the boom-to-end-all booms and was, in fact, the end of Mad River booms, began in the summer of 1877 (Weekly Humboldt Times 23 June 1877). The canal and boom continued to receive criticism. Some predicted “great damage” to Humboldt Bay and the bar, noting that large quantities of driftwood, debris, sediment, etc. would come down the river during high water and not being able to get to the ocean through its natural outlet would follow the boom and canal into the bay where “the sediment [would] be deposited, the driftwood lodged on the flats and shores, and incalculable amount of damage done that [would] injure Eureka in a business point of view, and destroy Humboldt Bay as a harbor” (Weekly Humboldt Times 18 Aug. 1877). As one who knew the river well, “N.V.” wrote a Letter to the Editor as the boom was under construction.

During the last twenty years there have been freshets as early as November, overflowing the whole, or part of Arcata bottom, carrying large spruce trees and driftwood, some of which can still be seen near the mouth of the river. The people best acquainted with Mad River know well that during such freshets no human power can manage these large trees, which must lodge against the Boom piers, when either these the piers will have to give way or Mad River forced into the Bay. To judge from the thorough manner in which these piers have been put in, I should think they will resist the pressure of the swift current of the river, and the trees and debris lodged against them will form a dam which necessarily must cause the river to open and widen new channels, throwing the whole river into the Bay along with sediments, driftwood and trees. This done, I believe that it will be but a matter of time to see the Bay gradually filling up, the rich farming land between Mad River and the Bay a mass of sand hills and driftwood, the Bay a mudflat and Eureka its capital. (Weekly Humboldt Times 1 Sept. 1877; emphasis added)

As predicted, problems with the boom and canal continued to impact the farm lands and the bay. In 1881, farmers on Mad River bottom asked for the boom’s removal. Or if not, that the boom company be required to build levees along the river banks to prevent further overflow of the stream onto their lands (Weekly Humboldt Times 12 Feb. 1881). Eureka leaders and the Board of Harbor Commissioners visited Mad River that same winter in response to complaints that the boom was “doing great damage to property along the river and was also materially affecting the navigation of the bay” (Weekly Humboldt Times 26 Feb. 1881). A freshet in December of that year resulted in a broken and battered boom.
caused by logs “impelled by the fierce rush of water” (Weekly Humboldt Times 31 Dec. 1881). Recalling the prediction that “no human power” could manage the logs, the newspaper’s account of the event seemed to bear that out.

The rise of Mad River was very sudden. At 7 o’clock Tuesday evening there was no unusual flow of water and at 11 o’clock, just four hours later, the boom was broken and the water from the river was flowing over the bottom land between Vance’s railroad bridge and the head of the bay. Eleven men were at the boom to take charge of the logs as they came down the river. They noticed early in the evening that the river was rising rapidly. All hands went to work moving logs down the canal to make way for those that were coming down the river. Before the men returned from the canal, the boom was divided and the logs were borne by the rushing torrent out of the river into the ocean….There were 1400 logs in the riverbed….Six hundred logs were turned into the canal before the break of the boom. Of the remaining 800 in the river, a large portion were carried out to sea and lost….The breaking of the boom is attributed to the choking up of the canal with logs, so that others coming down could not get into the canal and pressed again the boom until it was broken. The rise was very sudden and the logs came down in a heap with a rush. (Weekly Humboldt Times 31 Dec. 1881)

With the boom’s destruction, closure of the canal seemed assured, but years passed and the Harbor Commissioners continued to drag their collective feet. The Arcata Union editor penned a piece entitled, “Mad River Canal; Shut It Up,” some thirty years after the ditch was cut from the river to the slough. He noted that the initial six- or eight-foot ditch had grown by the river’s floods into quite a large stream, causing serious damage to the land along Mad River and the bay’s
channels, “growing out of the almost criminal neglect of the proper authorities in not shutting up that cursed canal....The channels and flats of our bay are rapidly filling up....” He went on to say that the canal was of no benefit to anyone and there was nothing to prevent the Harbor Commissioners from closing this “mud trap” and “Why the d...don’t they do it?” (Arcata Union 14 Aug. 1886). The following year the commissioners finally authorized a private citizen to close the canal, but it took years of breaks and repairs before the river was satisfied with its old channel and the public had a unobstructed road to the beach (Arcata Union 10 Sept. 1887, 21 July 1888, 4 Oct. 1890, 31 Jan. 1903).

Wharf Abandoned. Just when the wharf ceased to function is unclear. In 1908, more than fifty years after its construction, the largest steamer ever in Humboldt Bay—420 feet—took on cargos at the wharf, looming up at high tide like a “factory building” (Arcata Union 1 Aug. 1908). But just a few years later, when the City of Arcata acquired 400 acres of tidelands, plans were laid for extensive industrial development in recognition that the wharf was no longer sufficient and the bay’s channels too filled-in to accommodate shipping (Arcata Union 19 June 1913). The final death knell for the wharf came in 1914, when the railroad “gap” between Willits and southern Humboldt County was closed and trains could run all the way to Arcata. In 1917, the Northern Redwood Lumber Co., owners of the Korbel mill, sold its vessel, the North Fork, which, for thirty
years, had completed 1,060 round trips between the wharf and San Francisco, transporting 300,000,000 feet of lumber from the Korbel and Riverside mills (Arcata Union 2 Aug. 1917). The Arcata and Mad River Railroad no longer had a reason to dispose of lumber cargoes at the old wharf. The Northwestern Pacific Railroad ran through town, connecting with the “Annie and Mary” at Korblex north of Arcata, where it received the mills’ production. In 1942, the Arcata and Mad River Railroad right-of-way in Arcata was abandoned and the tracks taken up (Arcata Union 10 April 1942). The wharf and its buildings disappeared over time and what remains are a few mute pilings, reminders of that once vital undertaking.

**Reclamation.** Arcata Bay’s coastal plain between Jacoby Creek and Mad River Slough and up that slough was once a vast complex of tidal sloughs and marshes (U.S. Coast Survey 1870). The larger sloughs, including Mad River, Liscom, Daniels (McDaniels is incorrect), Butcher, and Gannon, were either fed by upland freshwater creeks (Janes Creek and Daniels Slough, for example) or depended solely on small tidal sloughs meandering through the marshes. After the wharf company’s track left the Plaza and passed beyond perhaps 4th Street, it crossed marsh, sloughs, and tidal flats to reach water. What happened to those rich marshes and sloughs which sustained Wiyot people and produced the prodigious numbers of waterfowl described by Capt. Ottinger? Reclamation. But what a misnomer. This activity created dry land where none had existed, not the reclaiming of dry land that had somehow been taken over by marshes and tide.

Early farming on Arcata bottom was cultivated grains and potatoes, but in the 1880s, farmers began developing dairy herds, converting plowed ground to clover pasture. Prior to construction of the first creamery in 1892, the local editor suggested that having a creamery would induce farmers to not only better manage their land, but to “add to their possessions by clearing timber patches and diking pieces of marsh” (Arcata Union 27 Feb. 1891, 16 April 1892).

**Our Marsh Land**—Partly surrounding Arcata, extending from Brainard’s Point on the southeast to the vicinity of the mouth of Mad river on the west, is a strip of marsh land, most of which the tide ebbs and flows over, consisting of several thousand acres. No richer or more productive land than this is to be found in any country, but it cannot be utilized while salt water flows over it. One or two attempts have been made to dike small patches of this land, but in only one case that we know of was the dike built in such manner as to keep out the salt water long enough to give the land a fair trial. Recently, however, work has been commenced with a view of making a success of the undertaking. Thos. Bair, President of the Bank of Arcata, is the owner of a half section of land about two miles west of Arcata of which 200 acres is marsh….A contract has been let to build over 500 rods of dike, which will reclaim pretty much all the marsh land and convert the
entire 320 acres into one farm, all of which can be cultivated. The dike as it is built is ten feet wide at the bottom, five feet at the top with an average height of five feet, both sides being laid with cuts of marsh sod, which will grow as in its natural state and make the dike impervious to any seepage or perforation of rodents,.

The Arcata bottom creamery is being built near where Mr. Bair is reclaiming his marsh land [corner of Lanphere and Seidell roads]. No better clover land lies outdoors than this marsh land when once redeemed from the effects of salt water and as all our farmers are beginning to see that they have been working on an upgrade by not putting their land in clover years ago, it is more than probable that one creamery will not meet the demands of our farms in one or two years from now [a second creamery was built in 1894]. Reclaiming our fine tillable land is a move in the right direction and one that will add much to the wealth of this end of the bay. (Arcata Union 20 Feb. 1892)

The following spring the Harpst and Spring Dike was under construction. It started on the bank of Butcher Slough just beyond the “town line,” followed down the slough to the bay, then along the edge of the bay to Jacoby Creek, where it extended up the creek as far as the tides. Enclosing about 350 acres, the dike removed tidal action from several farms, including that of Mel Roberts, present location of Health Sports, the soccer fields and the community center. The Union noted that the first owner who took up the marsh as swamp and overflowed land never dreamed that this stretch of country between Arcata and Jacoby Creek, “inhabited only by the festive clam and the busy little crab” would someday be pasture for hundreds of cattle (Arcata Union 18 June 1892).

A year later the Arcata Land Improvement Company, directors M.P. Roberts, George Zehndner, John Harpst, O.H. Spring, Sylvester Myers and John C. Bull, was incorporated and over the next couple of years pushed the reclamation of the marshes extending from the west side of the wharf railroad around the edge of the marsh toward Mad River Slough, beginning at Daniels Slough (Arcata Union 22 April 1893). In 1895, after reclaiming about 1,800 acres, the Improvement Company sold its dredger to Dr. Gross, who used it to reclaim the marsh in the area of Freshwater and Fay sloughs (Arcata Union 25 May 1895). By fall, the reclaimed land south and west of Arcata was being fenced off into suitable tracts for dairy farms (Arcata Union 12 Oct. 1895). In 1901, railroad construction along the bay from Eureka to Arcata created a new dyke for marsh lands south of Arcata (Weekly Humboldt Times 22 Aug. 1901). These early ditching and dredging activities were the first, but not the last to manipulate the land and waters of Arcata’s Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary.

**Lumber Mills.** Redwood logging and milling date from the county’s early days. It was initially concentrated around the bay, on its tributary streams, and up Mad River. Mills were large and locally-owned, providing employment to thousands of woods and mill workers and dominating the county’s economic and political life. All of this changed following World War II. Lumbermen from Oregon and Washington invaded northern California, establishing a new industry based on Doug fir, lots of small mills, and production of specialty items, including plywood. The change was swift. A county-wide survey by the Times in May 1946 found 100 mills in full operation with another 60 in the planning or construction stage (Humboldt Times 19 May 1946). Arcata had thirty operating mills by the new year and headlines proclaimed: “Arcata—The boom town of Northern California and considered one of the biggest lumber centers on the Pacific Coast” (Arcata Union 31 Jan. 1947).

Sierra Pacific’s founder R.H. (Curley) Emmerson came to Arcata in 1941 to manage a new lumber mill on Foster Avenue for G.L. Speier (Arcata Union 26 Sept. 1941). The following year he built his own mill—an all-steam mill just north of Arcata on Highway 299 (Humboldt Times 9 Feb. 1947). Selling this mill in 1946 to Jalmer Berg, Emmerson began construction of a new mill on the Arcata marsh site (Humboldt Times 31 May 1946). Within six months from the start of construction in June 1946, the mill was operating and nearing full production. A post-war, weekly feature in the Times, entitled “Log and Saw,” reported on Emmerson’s new mill.
Quonset Type Mill Nearing Full Output—One of the most spectacular of the new mills in Humboldt County lacks only ten days of being ready for full scale production. Designed and built by R.H. “Curley” Emmerson, the new operation is located on the outskirts of Arcata. Built to produce more than 50,000 feet of lumber a day using a one-shift crew of 13 men in the mill, the plant is among the first Quonset type mills to appear in this area. At a cost of $100,000, the mill has been constructed of heavy timber and designed to last forever, if necessary.

The log deck is raised on stilts of 12 by 12s and 6 by 12s with extra heavy cross braces for durability. The rounded aluminum roof which covers the mill and the flat roof of the green chain cost in the neighborhood of $3000. The headrig, capable of cutting logs up to seven feet in diameter, is a seven-foot band, used with a nine-inch spacing block and is operated by a 200-horse motor. The table edger is 6 by 54, powered with a 100-horse motor hooked up in direct drive....Logs are brought from the three-acre salt water pond to the log deck and are turned to an overhead canting device....Quonset type construction was used in order to make a cleaner mill, thus reducing the fire hazard and because of its cheaper construction.

During the winter months, Emmerson is cutting almost 100 percent redwood. His winter show is located on the Excelsior Investment tract south of Eureka which he recently purchased....The potential cut there is estimated at 10,000,000 feet. However, this timber represents only 10 percent of his holdings, the remainder of which is made up in fir from the Redwood Creek waters....For loading facilities, the Emmerson mill has its own spur running with an open switch from the Northwestern Pacific railroad. However, until he is able to install a bridge crane, he is using the shipping facilities of the Humboldt Lumber Handlers, occupying adjacent territory....(Humboldt Times 9 Feb. 1947).

After Berg’s Highway 299 mill burned in 1947, he purchased a half interest in Emmerson’s mill, and the new partnership began planning expansion with installation of new equipment (Arcata Union 16 May, 21 Nov. 1947). The following spring the partners sold the mill to the Arcata Lumber Products Co., but retained a block of stock in the new firm, which also planned extensive expansion to include a plywood operation, a sash and door plant, a resaw, planing mill and dry kilns. The plywood plant, scheduled to begin production in early 1949, would mill Doug fir only, producing 40 million feet annually (Arcata Union 16 April 1948). But Arcata Products was short-lived, suspending operation sometime in 1949, leaving the anticipated expansion on the drawing board (Arcata Union 5 May 1950).

In 1950, three years after its construction and a third ownership, the mill was purchased by Durable Fir Lumber Company. Stockholders of the new firm were Berg and the Twin Harbors Lumber Co, consisting of Washington men, Don and Henry Anderson, the latter also involved with the Sound Lumber Company which operated on west 10th street in Arcata. Again, in anticipation of bigger and better things for the mill, Durable intended to double its capacity from the original 50,000
feet per day and to install the resaw and planing mill planned in previous years.
The log pond was to be doubled to hold five million feet of logs. More filling of
tidal lands back of the plant was anticipated to provide space for the planing mill
and a storage site for lumber. The purchased property consisted of 22 acres (Arcata
Union 5 May 1950). A 2.7-acre piece of highway frontage, then G Street, was
acquired from the City in 1951 (Arcata Union 9 March 1951).

The oft-announced plywood plant finally came to fruition in 1951, when
Durable Plywood began construction of a million-and-a-quarter facility on a 2.5-
acre site with veneer production to begin in July (Arcata Union 9 March 1951).
Needing more space, Durable Plywood approached the City about leasing 101
acres of “bay frontage land for a high-tide log pond” (Arcata Union 13 July 1951).
Subsequent negotiations were for 200 acres of “city-owned tidelands for a log
storage pond” (Arcata Union 18 Jan. 1952). The caption to a 1953 aerial
photograph provides some description of both Durable Company plants.

A new view [looking northwesterly] of two established lumbering concerns in
Arcata. Durable Plywood Co. and Durable Fir Lumber Co., both located just south of
Arcata off Highway 101 [G Street]. The building in the lower left is Durable Plywood’s green veneer plant, which produces veneer for the Durable Plywood Co. plant at Calpella. To the left of the pond is the Durable Fir Lumber Co. Both concerns use the 14-acre pond, capable of holding five million feet of logs.

Durable Plywood production is estimated at two million board feet per month, based on an eight-hour, five-day week. The green veneer plant uses 25,000 board feet of logs every eight hours. The highway to the right of the pond is 101. To the left of the pond is the Northwestern Pacific Railroad track.

Durable Fir Lumber Co. has boosted its average production well over the mark of 45,000 board feet per day in 1950. The firm is equally owned by Twin Harbors Lumber Co. and Jalmer Berg. Officers are: Henry Anderson, president; Jalmer Berg, vice-president; Don Anderson, secretary….Clyde Williams is the Arcata plant manager. (Arcata Union 7 Aug. 1953)

Seemingly a successful business, Durable Fir Lumber Company, nonetheless, sold the lumber plant to Oregonians George Van Vleet, Sr. and George Van Vleet, Jr. in 1954 (Arcata Union 3 Sept. 1954). The Van Fleet Wood Products Co., incorporated that same year, operated two sawmills, this one in Arcata and another in Hoopa. In 1956, the Van Vleet sawmill in south Arcata near old Highway 101 employed 55 workers, producing 80,000 feet per day (Chamber of Commerce 1956). Van Vleet Wood Products remained at this site until at least 1961; by 1965 the company had relocated to St. Louis Road (Chamber of Commerce 1961, 1965).

Six years after construction, Durable Plywood was running three shifts daily, employing 190 men and producing both exterior and interior grades of plywood. An “etchwood” machine provided a brushing process for the interior plywood, creating a pleasing finish for interior paneling (Arcata Union 5 April 1957). The plywood plant at this location continued under the Durable Plywood Company name or as Twin Harbors through 1968, followed by Orleans Veneer and Lumber Co. from 1969 to about 1975 (City Directories). In 1962-1963, T H & F Sales, Inc was listed at 451 South “G” Street, the same address as Twin Harbors and Durable Plywood (City Directories). After the big concerns closed, there were possibly other small operations at these sites, but their identities were not determined.

North of the Durable plants was a lumber-shipping facility operated by Humboldt Lumber Handlers, which started up in 1946. Despite a shortage of railroad cars, lumber shipments through the NWP station and the Arcata and Mad River Railroad line set new records in the summer of 1946. Forty cars of lumber per day, averaging 20,000 feet each, passed through Arcata during July and August. Among the major shippers was Humboldt Lumber Handlers which averaged five cars each day, indicating 100,000 feet shipped from this one facility.
Business was so brisk for shippers that Humboldt Handlers added a second shift to accommodate local small mills. Opening at 6:30 a.m. each day, shipping went on until midnight and the amount leaving the yard totaled 250,000 feet of lumber per day (Humboldt Times 2 March 1947). The “Handlers” enterprise continued to grow responding to the needs of Arcata mills and ones to the north, all running full tilt.

Log and Saw—Humboldt Lumber Handlers has storage facilities for approximately 225 carloads of lumber in addition to its service for loading on the 950-foot spur leading into the yard.

In a year and a half of operation, the Humboldt Lumber Handlers, located southwest of Arcata, has sent over 80,000,000 feet of lumber by rail and truck to markets all over the nation. Now operating on two shifts and with a recent addition of another 300 feet of spur track, the operation is capable of loading up to 25 cars in two shifts.

Humboldt Lumber Handlers was established for a dual purpose back in August 1946:

1. To provide loading facilities for the small operations, accumulate carload lots and ship them economically.
2. To provide facilities to unload incoming trucks as quickly as possible.
To accomplish the job, Manager Monte Blanks has 15 men on the payroll, three stackers and a stake pointer. And this year, Humboldt Lumber Handlers will install rain proof storage facilities and a covered track so the lumber can be shipped dry. The five-acre tract will also be black-topped. (Humboldt Times 29 Feb. 1948).

Shriner’s Arcata Lumber Service, located “adjacent” to Humboldt Handlers, provided other services for small mill operators, taking rough lumber for sorting, grading, tallying, planing and resawing, all of which added value and prepared it for shipping at the next-door facility (Humboldt Times 16 March 1947, 2 Feb. 1948). Humboldt Handlers continued to operate as a loading facility until it was purchased by Brightwood Lumber Co., owned by Ivan H. Moenke, in 1958. Moenke also purchased the planing mill of Wes Cal Manufacturing Co., located on the same property, which was described as including 14 acres of land, a spur track, a plant, shop buildings and office (Arcata Union 28 March 1958).

It was possible to identify some of the industries located at this site, but dates should be considered approximations. Sources for this information include city directories, phone directories, and Chamber of Commerce mill listings.

All-Brite Lumber Company, (1957-1971), planing, remanufacturing, loading and dry kiln; then as Clayton All-Brite Lumber Co. (1972-1977).
Harris Pine Mills (1978-1986) furniture manufacturer; organized 1960; filed bankruptcy 1986. Opened first at Laurelwood, Oregon, Harris Pine Mills owned and operated several pine furniture manufacturing plants from which it shipped unassembled indoor furniture components to assembly plants located throughout country. The redwood Harris Pine Mills manufactured and assembled redwood patio furniture (online Harris Pine Mills).
Little Lake Industries(1987-1990) redwood patio furniture; organized 1984; corporation abandoned 1993; last address Willits (online Little Lake Industries)

The City of Arcata’s Redevelopment Agency acquired the 11.58-acre property about 2001, removing all the buildings associated with previous uses (Alyson Hunter, City of Arcata, 27 Jan. 2015).

City Designs. The bay’s tidelands south of town were considered worthless, serving “only as a breeding place for mosquitoes and an eye sore as one
approached...by the railroad” (Arcata Union 19 Aug. 1893). They were useful only as dumping grounds (literally!) for lost dogs, garbage, and sewage. Today those same bay edges are recognized as the biologically-rich, resilient systems they were and are, now so rare that they are the object of reclamation—true reclamation—to restore conditions as they were prior to Euro-American arrival. One recent effort for all to see is the Daniels Slough project which removed failing and obsolete levees and tidegates, creating 222 acres of tidelands and 69 acres of brackish and freshwater wetlands (City of Arcata website).

Beginning in 1904, when the City constructed its first sewer system to collect raw sewage for disposal directly to the bay and continuing through the 1960s, Arcata had designs on its tidelands and bay waters for dumping and development (Arcata Union 7 May 1904). Garbage disposal was authorized by the City at an “official dumping ground” at the foot of F street in 1906 (Arcata Union 1906). In 1931-32, the Fish and Game Commission conducted a bacteriological survey, finding that the discharge of raw sewage was contaminating the oyster beds in the Arcata trestle area. Despite this dire situation, it wasn’t until 1948 that the City finally submitted a bond issue to the voters for a sewage treatment facility (Arcata Union 23 Jan. 1948). Since the City had located the dog pound at the old city dump, one councilman suggested that the dog catcher and sewer plant operator be combined into one position (Arcata Union 27 May 1949, 13 July 1951).

Dependant on weather conditions, the earliest date for completion of Arcata’s sewage disposal plant would be “around the middle of February.”

….At a cost of around $80,000, Arcata will have an adequate sewage plant for the estimated 1970 population of 5,000. According to the Kaiser report, it can be enlarged with little expense by adding units. The new plant was authorized by the City following the request of the State Board of Health to stop polluting waters of the bay by discharging raw sewage. In 1947, the Council obtained the services of Kaiser Engineers. Kaiser reported that it was necessary to construct a primary type sewage treatment plant to treat sewage prior to discharge into the bay. They suggested the site of the plant on city-owned properties south of the city on highway 101, adjacent to the bay. The plant consists of a pump house and aerator unit, clarifier and digestion unit and two sludge drying beds. The sewage plant will remove 90% of the grease, 70% of suspended solids, 40% BOD and 75% of the bacteria. The annual operating cost $4,800. (Arcata Union 15 Dec. 1950)

It took many, many years—exactly twenty—after the State reported contamination of the oyster beds, before the sewage plant began operations in 1952 (Arcata Union 22 Feb. 1952). Four years later, the City began planning for an oxidation pond for additional treatment of Arcata’s sewage. Voters approved another bond issue to bring Arcata’s sewage system up to a “satisfactory and adequate level.” Construction of the pond required a Corps of Engineers permit
which would include levees, a small ditch along the toe of the levee on the
northeasterly side of the pond to provide for “drainage from the adjoining area”
and another levee along the bay which would be protected from wave action by
brush and wire mats (Arcata Union 20 April 1956). Once again those pesky oysters
were demanding a better sewage treatment system (Arcata Union 11 Jan. 1957).
Dredging for the pond began in April 1957, and additional improvements in the
sewage treatment plant followed (Arcata Union 5 April, 17 May 1957).

Garbage disposal sites were scattered throughout the county, including sites
on Fickle Hill and at Kneeland, Carlotta, and Table Bluff, which were operated by
private businesses with county-granted franchises (Arcata Union 31 July 1964). In
1960, the County began to deal with its public dump problem and the City of
Arcata raised it hand, offering to provide a site on “City-owned tidewater lands on
South G Street for a sanitary landfill county dump” (Arcata Union 8 July 1960).
Councilman Falor suggested that the dump would be a “very useful way of filling
in the land, paving the way for a boat harbor, a parking lot, and recreation area”
(Arcata Union 8 July 1960). After several years of negotiations and false starts, the
“sanitary landfill dump” (Mt. Trashmore) opened in 1964. In response to an order
from the Corps of Engineers, the dump was closed for “environmental reasons,”

The “boat harbor” discussed in connection with the landfill was a much
scaled-down version of several proposals that were considered over the years. As
early as 1904, the City wanted to build a canal 200 feet wide and a mile and a half
long to connect Arcata with deeper channels in the bay to accommodate large
vessels so they could discharge their cargoes right at the edge of town. This would
eliminate the need to haul cargoes by railroad over the wharf (Arcata Union 30
April and 7 May 1904). The proposal languished until 1913, when the State
granted tidelands within the two-mile limit to the City and a new project was
suggested. The mud and silt dredged from the channels and basin would be
sufficient to fill tidelands to a level that would make the area “first class” for
factory sites.

For the millions of dollars worth of magnificent redwood timber waiting to be cut
from the Big Lagoon north, Arcata is the natural outlet and if we can offer free factory
sites, where rail and water meet there is no good reason why Arcata should not grow to
be an industrial city of considerable proportions within the next ten years. (Arcata Union
19 June 1913).

Factory sites remained undeveloped until construction of the first mills on
the reclaimed land after World War II, and it wasn’t water transport that lured the
mills to this location, it was railroads. Nonetheless, the City wanted some kind water-connected development. As the landfill was under discussion, filling and dredging seemed possible. In 1960, a three-man committee was appointed to come up with a plan for a small boat basin and deep water channel in Arcata Bay. Proposed as a phased development, the City envisioned a harbor sufficient to accommodate larger barges and ships and a “sizeable industrial site” created from the dredged fill (Arcata Union 25 Nov. 1960).

Arcata Union, 13 Dec. 1968. Arcata Marina as proposed by John Blume and Associates, Engineers, San Francisco
Harbor development was slow in coming, but in 1963 the City’s engineering department revived a plan for a “full-fledge” harbor in Arcata Bay at a cost of $30 million. To be located adjacent to the oxidation pond, the plan was a “take-off” of a design proposed a half-century before. The harbor was to cover 1,360 acres; have a dredged channel 30-35 feet deep; and consist of four wharfs, two 4,000 feet long, one each of 2,000 and 5,200 feet to provide berthing for 300 boats (Arcata Union 1 March 1963). Not forgotten, but less ambitious than the original $30 million project, the marina in 1968 was planned as four, finger piers to accommodate 280 boats of 45 feet maximum length. The major developments were to be owned by the City, but boat facilities, shops, and restaurants would be leased to private parties (Arcata Union 16 Feb. 1968). The City continued to forge ahead with its million-dollar marina, anticipating that the boat ramp would be ready by the summer of 1969 while planning continued for a 200x300-foot boat basin (Arcata Union 11 April 1969). Arcata’s harbor development projects never happened, the lone cement boat launch ramp at the end of I street the only outcome of all those years of planning. It could be that the long-anticipated grand scheme failed because its time had passed, replaced by a public awareness that recognized the intrinsic value of a naturally-functioning Humboldt Bay with tidal flats, marshes, and sloughs.

…Coming across Humboldt Bay past the ruins of the old railroad terminus, now the home of hundreds of cormorants, the water at low tide gave way to mud flats which, in turn, were criss-crossed by many channels.

Taking the main channel, the flat-bottomed boat glided by the pilings of the old railroad piers now covered with native oysters. Sandpipers tried their luck along the banks in their search of sea worms, while further away egret, heron and duck were in evidence.

Suddenly the mud flat gave way to much grass situated on bluffs above the channel. Hundreds of sparrows flew among the ruins of many old docks. Large fish broke water before the boat and a small fox peered cautiously from the tall clumps of grass.

“It’s fantastic,” said one of the Fish and Game men. “It’s a wonder why I never came here before.” (Arcata Union 11 April 1969)

Meanwhile, in 1961, Humboldt State College professor John DeWitt approached the City with an novel idea—raising salmonids in the oxidation pond. Recipient of his fifth research grant from the U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare in as many years, Professor DeWitt was interested in determining whether it was possible to improve the treatment process in oxidation ponds by using them as rearing ponds. He had planted fingerlings, produced at the College’s fish hatchery, in oxidation ponds between Arcata and Santa Rosa and as far inland as Redding (Arcata Union 1 Dec. 1961). Two years later, Dr. George Allen asked
permission to build a fish-rearing pond at the City’s treatment facility (Arcata Union 22 Nov. 1963). During subsequent years, Dr. Allen and his fisheries students developed and perfected the fish-rearing program, providing the inspiration and a template for the Arcata Marsh Project.
Bibliography

Newspapers
Arcata Leader. Published in Arcata. 1879-1881. Humboldt State University Library. MF249.

Arcata Union. Published in Arcata. 1886 to 1995. Humboldt State University Library. MF713.

Daily Alta California. Published in San Francisco. 1849-1891. Humboldt State University Library. MF225.


Northern Californian. Published in Union. 1858-1860. Humboldt State University Library. MF284.

West Coast Signal. Published in Eureka. 1871-1880. Humboldt State University Library. MF706 and hard copy in Humboldt Room.

References
Borden, Stanley T. “Arcata and Mad River; 100 Years of Railroading in the Redwood Empire.” The Western Railroader. 17(8) June 1954.


City Directories and Phone Directories. Humboldt State University Library, Humboldt Room.
Coy, Owen C. *The Humboldt Bay Region, 1850-1875*. The California State Historical Association, Los Angeles. 1929.


Recorder’s Office, Humboldt County Courthouse, Eureka.

**Maps**
Belcher Atlas of Humboldt County. 1921-22. Online Humboldt State University Library, Special Collections.

U.S.G.S. Arcata South quad. 1959; photorevised 1972.

U.S. Coast Survey. 1870. Humboldt State University Humboldt Room.

**Photographs**

Cherry, Edgar. Online Humboldt State University Library, Special Collections under Palmquist collection.

Ericson, A.W. Online Humboldt State University Library, Special Collections.

Grant, M.H. Online Humboldt State University Library, Special Collections under Palmquist collection.

Shuster, Merle. Aerial photographs, 1946 to mid1960s. Online Humboldt State University Library, Special Collections.
