

THIS POINT... in time

NEWSLETTER

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POINT SAN PABLO AND OTHER POINTS TO OUR NORTH

See page 14 (from Bruce Beyart)

Point San Pablo – Part 1 Past, Present & Future

The Past

The First of Three Articles on Point San Pablo

By Bruce Beyaert

Just north of Point Molate—where the waters of San Francisco Bay meet San Pablo Bay—lies one of the Bay Area’s most extraordinary and least-known headlands: Point San Pablo. Once the most diverse and vital port in the City of Richmond, maritime operations have long since ceased, leaving this scenic headland poised for reincarnation.

Point San Pablo is a regional landmark. Together with Point San Pedro in Marin County, it defines the San Pablo Strait separating San Francisco and San Pablo Bays. While exploring from Mission Dolores in 1811, Father Abella wrote in his diary, “gave to Point Huchones the

name Point San Pablo and to the opposite point (Abastos) that of San Pedro.” Thus, in the process of honoring Saints Paul and Peter, the name of the local Huichin Ohlone people was erased from modern maps.

A 115-foot-deep channel lies between Point San Pablo and East Brother Island. This impressive underwater canyon was carved during the last Ice Age some 13,000 years ago, when the Pacific Ocean shoreline lay near the Farallon Islands. One can imagine the torrent of water rushing past this headland, draining California’s Great Central Valley—fed by undammed Sierra Nevada rivers—on its way through what is now



Raccoon Strait and the Golden Gate to the distant ocean shoreline.

This deep water made Point San Pablo ideal for establishing a port without dredging; however, there was no serviceable road. The East Shore Company, which owned most of the land, solved this transportation problem in 1903 by building the Richmond Belt Line railroad linking the transcontinental rail system with Point San Pablo and Blake Brothers Quarry near Castro Point. They immediately followed by constructing the Belt Line Wharf and warehouse at Point San Pablo.

Rail transportation was essential in the early years, both for shipping goods and for commuting dock workers. The Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroads provided rolling stock and operated trains in alternating one-year cycles under a leasing agreement with the East Shore Company, represented by President H.D. Pillsbury. Point San Pablo was separated from Point Molate by a railroad trestle, preventing the use of trucks for moving cargo to and from the wharf. It was not until World War II that tidelands were filled and the road improved—with assistance from the U.S. Navy—to allow truck access for transporting munitions to the wharf.

The Belt Line Wharf was a multimodal operation. Cargo arrived by sea for storage and distribution by rail, and by rail for delivery overseas by sailing vessels and steamships. The combination of deep water and rail access stimulated construction of additional marine terminal infrastructure in the early 1900s, and Point San Pablo quickly became Richmond's most vital and diverse port.

Huge wooden warehouses on the wharf were packed with Richmond products ready for export to Europe and Asia—goods as diverse as wine and kerosene. One remarkable photograph shows a warehouse filled wall-to-wall with barrels of wine from Winehaven awaiting shipment abroad. The Flood Brothers shipping fleet of sailing vessels and steamships used the wharf to ship “case oil” from the Standard Oil refinery. Before bulk tankers became universal, kerosene was exported as “case oil”—two five-gallon tin cans packed into a wooden crate. Flood Brothers vessels shipped these cases by the thousands for

trade in the South Sea islands and Asia, where kerosene was the primary fuel for lighting and cooking.

Beginning in 1917, Dorward Terminals, acting as agent for the Philippine Refining Corporation, acquired ten acres for importing coconut oil, tung oil, and other vegetable oils from Asia and Pacific islands in deep-draft tank ships. These products were stored in tanks and processed on site. The company operated cold presses and refining equipment to clarify the oils, producing materials for rail shipment to soap manufacturers, paint producers, and brokers.

In 1929, Philippine Refining sold its ten acres to Pacific Molasses Company and moved operations to a six-acre parcel to the north. Pacific Molasses held a five-year contract for the entire molasses output of the Hawaiian Islands and also imported from Java and the Philippines. Philippine Refining assumed responsibility for operating the molasses facility. Molasses was stored and distributed by rail to Pacific and Midwestern states for alcohol manufacture and livestock feed. Today, only the boiler house remains, where steam was once generated to keep molasses sufficiently fluid for pumping and storage in tanks located on the hills above.

In 1931, the East Shore Company sold its 20-foot-wide rail corridor to the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific railroads, with each railroad operating and maintaining the facilities in alternating five-year cycles. In 1932, Parr-Richmond Terminal Corporation acquired East Shore's wharf property, along with inland properties owned by Pacific Molasses, Standard Oil and Philippine Refining, which became lessees. The new operation was named Parr-Richmond Terminal 4. Parr then sold the wharf and nearby land to the City of Richmond in 1936 as part of a deal in which the City leased the property back to Parr for 50 years in exchange for 25 percent of pier revenues.

In 1937, there was an extraordinary boom in the construction of fish reduction plants to produce high-protein meal for livestock and poultry feed, as well as oil for paint and soap manufacture. The remote location was ideal, as the odor would not drift into residential areas. At least five companies operated fish reduction

plants on the large pier, while others worked from old ships beached nearby, using onboard boilers for processing. Twelve plants were built within a four-month period, employing upwards of 500 full-time workers along the shoreline north and east of the wharf, where the water was shallower.

These plants competed for catches brought in by more than 100 purse seiners, primarily landing herring and sardines. Most of the estimated 1,000 fishermen were Italian and Slavic immigrants. During World War II, higher-paying (and less odorous) jobs in the Kaiser shipyards drew workers away from the fish reduction plants.

Most of the fish reduction structures were demolished or incorporated into the large Red Rock Warehouse, built after 1938 for the canning of sardines and other fish. The company operated a fleet of 75 high-speed cutters, as fish had to be cleaned, cut and placed in chilled brine while fresh. Employees lived in a large barracks on the hillside above. The collapse of the sardine run in the late 1940s ultimately ended most small sardine

canning and processing operations throughout the region.

At least two shrimp companies operated along the eastern shoreline: one owned by the Ghio Brothers and another, the Lincoln Shrimp Company, owned by Mr. Chan. Shrimp were caught by net from small traditional vessels—lamparas used by Italian immigrants and junks used by Chinese fishermen—then cooked in large vats and dried in the sun.

Point San Pablo's history also included a hotel, a roadhouse, and cafés at various times. The Point San Pablo Hotel opened in 1903 and was owned by prominent businessman W.J. (Bill) Steele, who owned several hotels and saloons. It received extensive newspaper coverage in 1913 when two hungry convicts, escaped from San Quentin, arrived late at night seeking a meal. Steele telephoned the police after noticing that one of the men was wearing a striped prison suit beneath his shirt and coveralls. The convicts overheard him and escaped in a small skiff they



had stolen. When the hotel burned down in 1918, Steele announced his intention to rebuild at once.

Steele may have built on the hotel site the “roadhouse” described in the oral history of John Parr Cox:

“Right behind Terminal No. 4 at Point San Pablo, and between the land of the Pacific Molasses and the Standard Oil Company property, was a huge roadhouse. It was an excellent restaurant—wine, women and song were available there in quantity. Very few sailors ever went any further than that particular point. That's where bachelors took their wives. It was busy. The regular staff there, counting waitresses as well as cooks and housekeepers, was about fifteen or twenty. So it was a pretty good-sized operation.”

The establishment was particularly popular from 1920 to 1933 for serving liquor during Prohibition. At that time, “roadhouse” referred to an out-of-town establishment that served illicit liquor with food and sometimes engaged in prostitution. In 1921, a Richmond Record-Herald columnist decried the “roadhouse evil” that “affronts decency by pandering to vice instead of catering to the wants of respectability” and “would bring the blush of shame to the galvanized face of a pirate.”

The dining scene appears to have quieted after the roadhouse burned down in 1937 or 1938, although meals could still be found at the Fish Point Café and, later, at the Lucky Penny Café in 1965.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy utilized the docks at Point San Pablo for shipment of naval ordnance such as shells and torpedoes. The site served as a major munitions shipping depot before the construction of Port Chicago Naval Weapons Station and again after the devastating explosion at Port Chicago in 1944.

In 1956, Del Monte Fishing Company and Pacific Sea Products, Inc. contracted with Independent Renderers, Inc. to expand its plant on the eastern side of Point San Pablo to process whales caught along California's coastal migration routes. Boats brought whales into shallow water where large grappling hooks pulled them up a ramp by their tails, one at a time. A crew of 40 men

reportedly could reduce a humpback whale to oil, poultry meal, and pet food in approximately 90 minutes. On average, about 175 finback, humpback, and sperm whales were processed annually.

It was the last whaling station operating in the nation when closed in 1971, following the federal ban on commercial whaling in the United States. The facility was returned to service as a meat rendering plant and burned down in 1995.

In 1973, the City purchased the remainder of Terminal 4 land from Parr and took over operations as City of Richmond Terminal 4.

In 1976, 60 years after beginning operations at Point San Pablo, Dorward Terminals was acquired by Paktank. The facility expanded to receive tanker ships delivering petroleum products, chemicals, and liquid fertilizers. Storage grew to more than 100 tanks of various sizes with a combined capacity exceeding 500,000 barrels. Operations included equipment for treating, blending, filtering, and drumming liquid products, supported by facilities for shipment by rail and truck.

Over time, all of these port operations became economically infeasible. Pacific Molasses departed in 1993. Royal Vopak merged with Paktank and shut down in 2000. Tanks and pipelines were removed, and contaminated soils were remediated pursuant to a 2007 order of the Regional Water Quality Control Board. The Red Rock Warehouse was demolished and the site cleaned up in 2016. During 2024 - 2025, the City of Richmond removed the huge Terminal 4 wharf, pilings, and warehouse structures on the headland at a cost in excess of \$9 million using grant funds from multiple sources.

Sources and Credits: This history was compiled from many diverse sources. The core narrative is derived from the 1986 UC Berkeley Bancroft Library oral history *Fifty Years of Industry on the Richmond Waterfront* by John Parr Cox, retired president of Parr Terminal Ltd. and nephew of founder Fred D. Parr. Mr. Cox served for many years as superintendent of Parr-Richmond Terminal 4. Special thanks go to Daniel Butt and James Cheshareck for providing newspaper articles that brought this history to life and filled important knowledge gaps.

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