LIME KILN CHRONICLES
Newsletter of the Friends of the Cowell Lime Works Historic District
University of California, Santa Cruz

Hay Barn Work Begins

A big THANK YOU to all those who contributed to our year-end appeal last December. Due to the generosity of our members, we met our fundraising goal for Phase 1 of the Hay Barn restoration project, which involves recording how the barn was constructed.

Bill Hurley (Dos Osos Timberworks) and Paul Oatman (Sherwood Forest Timber Frames) completed field work for historical drawings and documentation of the interior of the barn. They are now in the process of completing the finished drawings to Historical American Building Survey (HABS) standards and will be submitting them to us shortly. Chris McMorris (JRP Historical Consultants) and photographer Bill Dewey completed large format and digital photography of the barn, and Chris and associates also compiled historical data on the use of the barn. They will be submitting this part of the HABS record to us as well.  (Continued on page 2)

150th Birthday Celebration

This past February 17th marked Samuel Henry (Harry) Cowell’s 150th birthday. To honor his contribution to Santa Cruz history, the Friends hosted a birthday party on Saturday, February 19. It was held at the UCSC Women’s Center, located in the old ranch house (aka Cardiff House) where the Cowell family once lived.

Some 65 people attended, including, Cowell College provost Faye Crosby; Hal Hyde (Friends member and a former assistant chancellor); Lime Kiln Legacies co-authors Bob Piwarzyk, Alverda Orlando, and Sierra Ryan; representatives from Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park; plus numerous other Friends and interested members of the general public.

This event would not have been such a success without help from many people. We thank Peg Danielson for generously providing refreshments; Cynthia Mathews for acting as MC and helping with organizing and publicity; Tremain Jones for advertising it on our Facebook page; Don Lauritson, Jenifer Lienau Thompson, and David Subocz for helping with set up and take down; Lisa Rose for serving as event photographer; Lynne Stoops and Sally Morgan for their help with planning and organizing; and Jill Perry for setting up the audiovisuals.

Frank Perry organized and presented a short slide show on Harry Cowell (see also the article on page 3); and UCSC students Lauren Wysham, Christina Powell, Kelsey Knox, and Allie Bender helped with the fine display of artifacts unearthed during archaeological excavations within the Historic District.

For those of you who missed the event, watch a slide show on YouTube (search “Harry Cowell’s Birthday”).

Hay Barn interior, showing timber framing and roof damage.
Thank you Jim!

The Friends sincerely thank Jim MacKenzie for his service on the Friends Board of Directors. As a professional photographer and graphic artist, Jim set the highest standards for excellence and quality in the design of our announcements, posters, and the walking tour brochure. We wish him all the best in his future endeavors.
Harry Cowell
and the Cowell Family Legacy

By Frank Perry

Because the year 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of Harry Cowell’s birth, this is an appropriate occasion to take a look back at the role of the Cowell family in Santa Cruz County history. How might the Santa Cruz of today be different if the Cowells had never been part of the story?

The Cowells are not an easy family to investigate. Although very wealthy and among the most influential people in County annals, they were a very private family and shunned publicity. It would also appear that they were camera shy, as only a few photographs of just some of the family members have survived.

Originally, the authors of the book Lime Kiln Legacies (including myself) naively planned to devote a separate chapter to the Cowells. We soon discovered what an immense task that would be. Henry Cowell was involved in everything from lime making to harvesting seal pelts and had economic interests from California to Alaska. To do justice to the topic would have taken more time than was available, and many of the likely sources of information are not very accessible. Over the past four years, with the proliferation of online resources and investigations by several other historians, a more detailed picture of the Cowells can now be painted.

The full Cowell story is probably still beyond reach, but perhaps someday an ambitious investigator with the necessary time and fortitude will tackle it. In the meantime, here is a brief look back at the Cowells, especially Harry, on the occasion of his sesquicentennial.

Harry’s father, Henry Cowell, came to California during the Gold Rush and developed a very successful warehousing and drayage (hauling) business in San Francisco. His was the equivalent of a modern day trucking company, but with horse and wagon.

In 1865 Cowell bought A. P. Jordan’s half interest in the lime-manufacturing firm of Davis and Jordan. A. P. Jordan had supervised the company’s lime works in Santa Cruz, while his partner, I. E. Davis, sold the product out of the company office and warehouse in San Francisco.

After the purchase, Cowell moved with his wife, Harriet, and five children from San Francisco to Santa Cruz and assumed Jordan’s role as resident owner of the manufacturing plant. Mrs. Cowell and the children arrived in early July, with Henry coming down a short time later after settling affairs in the City. The transfer of ownership had been rather hurried as Jordan was very ill and decided to sell on short notice. Cowell had lent the company a substantial sum of money, so he was in an ideal position to now become a partner.

Cowell soon focused his business interests on lime. Over the years he bought up other lime companies whenever possible in an effort to dominate the central and northern California lime market. The business climate in California after the Gold Rush was not unlike that of Silicon Valley today. A new market opened up (in this case, California), and major players jockeyed for control. Cowell was too wise however, to sink all his income back into lime. He diversified by dabbling in banking, mortgages, railroads, a hotel, road paving...
unrolling the hose, and hooking it up to the city water supply. Ten or more men, arranged in pairs, pulled the cart, responding as fast as they could to the alarm. Hose companies from different cities would sometimes hold competitions to see who was the fastest. The best sprinters, like Harry, were always in one of the two lead positions.

It is not known just how many fires Harry helped fight, but his signature appears under active members of the company.

After Henry died, Ernest, being the oldest son, took over the daily operation of the business, though all four children owned an equal number of shares.

Like his father, Ernest was a “lime guy,” and the early 1900s was an especially busy period for the company. He supervised the building of a new plant for Santa Cruz, located at Rincon. The plant depended on oil for fuel, so was situated beside the railroad tracks where the oil could be easily delivered. The site is marked today by a pullout on Highway 9 at the southern edge of Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. Lime rock for this plant came from the upper quarry at UCSC, then known as the “Rincon Quarry.”

Ernest also continued a trade dispute with the Tacoma and Roche Harbor Lime Company. Known as the “Lime War,” it pitted the Henry Cowell Lime and Cement Co. against its nemesis in Washington. The firms feuded for years.

During this same period, Portland cement was beginning to replace lime in many types of construction. To remain competitive, Ernest Cowell built a cement plant in Contra Costa County. It was a huge operation with its own company town, appropriately called “Cowell.”

There were also setbacks. The 1906 earthquake destroyed the company’s office, rental, and warehouse buildings in San Francisco, but Ernest remained optimistic. None of the Cowell family members were injured, and huge quantities of lime and cement were now needed for rebuilding.

Henry Cowell was not known for philanthropy, though there is some evidence that he occasionally...
they returned. This left Harry, then age 50, in charge of
the company.

Under Harry, the lime and cement business
continued to prosper, and in 1925 the company opened
up a retail building-supply business in Santa Cruz,
located on lower Pacific Avenue.

Harry’s real passion, however, was cattle—both beef
cattle and oxen. Both had been raised at the ranch in
Santa Cruz since the days of Davis and Jordan.
According to George Cardiff, who managed the Santa
Cruz ranch, Harry raised cattle on nearly all his ranches.

When trucks began to replace wagons, Harry was
reluctant to make the change. Not until Cardiff
demonstrated that the trucks would actually save money
did Cowell finally say goodbye to the horse teams.

There were also goats and some exotic animals, such
as peacocks, elk, and buffalo at the ranch in Santa Cruz.
According to Wilbert Patten, who grew up in Santa Cruz
during The Depression, the buffalo were kept in the
pasture near the ranch house (east of the UCSC main
entrance). “They were there a long time,” he recalls. A
1926 newspaper account placed the elk in the same area,
but Patten remembers elk being at Pogonip. He spent
many happy hours playing on the Cowell lands as a kid
and recalls elk being penned near the watering trough
along what is today called Spring Trail.

Both the buffalo and elk thrived. The 1926 account
states that two buffalo calves had been born recently. The
Cowell’s forbade hunting on the property, fearing that
cattle or other livestock might be hit. Nevertheless, in
1895 someone shot and killed a steer. Years later,
someone killed one of the elk. “Somebody shot it and
took the teeth,” remembers Patten.

Given the small size of the ranch house in Santa
Cruz, the Cowell children grew up modestly. As adults,
however, they lived a life more typical of the financially
privileged. Harry had a mansion in San Francisco, while

supported various charities. He helped with construction
in 1890 of the Congregational Church (located where the
Boys and Girls Club is now). An article written in 1950
says that the senior Cowell also donated to the YMCA.

In the early 1900s the Cowell children began to
distinguish themselves for their generosity towards
various educational and charitable causes. In 1903 Ernest
established a scholarship at Santa Cruz High School for
students wishing to attend the University of California.
The scholarship still exists and is today administered by
the Greater Santa Cruz County Community Foundation.
In 1904 Ernest also made a donation to the new Public
Library in Santa Cruz. He later bequeathed a considerable
slice of his fortune to the University of California.

Prior to her death in 1903, Sarah Cowell had served
on the board and been a contributor to the San Francisco
Nursery for Homeless Children. Helen Cowell is on
record has helping with the relief effort for flood victims
in Mexico. Later, in 1924, Harry, Helen, and Isabella
purchased land and constructed a building to house the
San Francisco Association for the Blind (now the
LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired).

In 1911 Ernest Cowell died rather suddenly from
meningitis. It was so sudden that his sisters, away on a
trip through Europe, did not learn of his passing until

Harry Cowell was more comfortable in the saddle than the
office. In the majority of the known photos of him, he is on or
next to a horse.
his sisters shared a mansion in Atherton. Harry Cowell also had his own private railroad car and bought racehorses. The sisters, besides traveling, collected art (eventually bequeathed to San Francisco Museums). “A couple of awful nice girls,” according to George Cardiff. “One thing about the Cowells, they were wonderful linguists, wonderful conversationalists.”

Not surprisingly, Santa Cruzans often looked to Harry Cowell for support of various endeavors. Cowell had a certain fondness for the town of his boyhood and accommodated the locals, especially long time friends, when the request was reasonable.

According to a 1950 newspaper article, many of Cowell’s contributions to the town often went unpublicized. “Harry Cowell . . . never came to Santa Cruz that he didn’t look up his old friends. Many and many a Santa Cruzan was helped over a trying experience by the kindness and generosity of [Harry Cowell]. If a friend or any of his children . . . were sick, Harry Cowell was available to put them in a hospital and pay the expenses of keeping them there; and if they died, of paying the funeral expenses, too.”

When entrepreneur Fred Swanton, wanted to establish a golf course, Cowell leased out land at Pogonip. At least 25 local kids earned money caddying there each summer. When Harry’s westside neighbors, Philip and Ethel Fridley, wanted to set up an auto camp beside the San Lorenzo River, Harry leased 10-acre Sycamore Grove for just a dollar a month.

In later years, however, Harry became rather irked by people who kept wanting donations. George Cardiff recounted a conversation he once had with Cowell: “You know, George, there’s never been a businessman in Santa Cruz that’s ever come up to the house here and paid me a friendly visit.’ He said, ‘Whenever I come down to Santa Cruz, they call and want to make a date with me, but it doesn’t take me long to find out they want something.’ He said they always wanted something. ‘Give us this. Give us that. Give us something else.’ All give. He said there never was a businessman in Santa Cruz that paid him a friendly visit. And he said, ‘There’s nobody that likes people and likes to talk with people more than I do.’”

The 1950 article described Harry in his later years: “You could tell him as far away as you could see him. He was a big, handsome man . . . who rode like a Centaur and sported a white goatee and mustache that . . . gave him the appearance of Buffalo Bill Cody, the famous frontiersman of Harry Cowell’s boyhood.”

In 1946 Cowell closed both the lime works at Rincon and the cement plant in Contra Costa County. Two of the major uses of lime were diminishing: Portland cement mortar was replacing lime mortar, and sheetrock was replacing lath and plaster. Lime remained in demand for industrial uses, but to remain competitive, Cowell would have had to modernize the plant. Now, at age 85, Harry’s enthusiasm for big new projects had no doubt waned. It had always been a family-owned business, but only two members remained, Harry and Isabella. There were no heirs, and Isabella died in 1950.

In the early 1950s, Harry (then in his nineties) made two major donations to Santa Cruz: Cowell Beach and Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. Today, they are among nine places in the County bearing the family name. There is also Henry Cowell Drive, Cowell-Wilder Regional Trail, Cowell Street, Cowell College and Cowell Student Health Center at UCSC, Cowell Mountain, and, of course, the Cowell Lime Works Historic District.

Before Harry died, at age 93, he provided for the creation of the S. H. Cowell Foundation to receive his estate, valued at over $12 million. The Foundation continues to this day, making grants primarily for educational and social programs. The Fall Creek, Pogonip, and UCSC properties were acquired by public agencies from the Foundation. Although Harry Cowell
Roof were so rotten that none of that wood was suitable for reuse. However, most of the redwood siding was found to be salvageable.

The siding nails have been removed and each board is being restored. Holes are being filled with wood epoxy and new pieces of old redwood are being spliced into the rotten areas. The building was on a wood foundation, which had gradually sunk into the dirt over the years, causing the lower end of all the siding to deteriorate. Each board must be restored to its original length for the building to return to its original appearance.

Because the shed is so small (12 x 9 feet), we are able to carry out the restoration work indoors. The wood must be dry when using the wood epoxy, so being inside has been a boon during the rainy winter. Many thanks to the UCSC staff for providing access to a dry workspace.

The reconstructed shed will be faithful to the construction details and appearance at the time it was disassembled and will be in the same location as before. So far we have found no historic photographs of this building. If anybody knows of some, we would love to see them.

Although used in recent years as a storage shed, the structure may have at one time been inhabited. This is suggested by a hole in the roof sheathing for a stove pipe, which indicates the building may have been heated at some time. The hole was later covered by shingles.

Archaeological excavations at the site by student interns unearthed a few household items such as pieces of china—further evidence that someone may have lived in the building.

In days past, outbuildings were often used as spare bedrooms, especially in the summer. The building could have been sleeping quarters for guests, a servant, a ranch worker, or even one of the Cowell boys.
Scenes from Harry Cowell’s Birthday Celebration, February 19, 2011 —

The guests arrive.

Peg Danielson serves up birthday cake.

Cowell College Provost Faye Crosby with Hal Hyde.

L to R: Allie Bender, Jean Dempsey, Christina Powell, and Lauren Wysham.

Display of artifacts unearthed in the District.

Frank Perry presents lecture on Harry’s life.

Photos by Lisa Rose

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